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SYMBOLISM

IN

ANCIENT AMERICAN ART.

BY

F. W. PUTNAM and C. C. WILLOUGHBY.

An abstract of a paper presented before the Section of Anthropology, A. A. A. S., at the Springfield Meeting, August, 1895.

[From the PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE, VOL. XLIV, 1896.]

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SYMBOLISM IN ANCIENT AMERICAN ART. By Prof. F. W. PUTNAM and Mr. C. C. WILLOUGHBY, Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

[ABSTRACT.]

AN abstract of this paper can be hardly more than a brief description of a few of the numerous drawings which have been prepared for the illustration of the art of the various peoples of America. Many of these drawings were exhibited to the Section in the form of enlarged and colored diagrams by means of which the various figures, forming the complex designs could be more readily traced than is possible in a black and white illustration.

In presenting the paper Professor Putnam alluded to his study of the subject during the past quarter of a century, and to the large amount of material which he has brought together during that time. He called attention to the fact that Mr. Willoughby, his assistant, had been intimately associated with him in these studies during the past two years.

The marked development of conventionalism and symbolism in the art of the people who built the old earthworks in the Ohio valley and southward, indicates their connection with certain peoples of the southwest and of Mexico and Central America. It also furnishes one more point of evidence that the Ohio earthwork builders were more closely allied with the early stock, of which the ancient Mexicans were a branch, than with the tribes of the eastern part of the continent. The art of the eastern tribes,—with the exception here and there of slight resemblance which can easily be accounted for by survival from ancient contact,—is of an entirely different character with different motives and different symbols; whereas this old art of Ohio is closely related to that of Mexico and Central America, and many of the symbols are identical. There is a certain resemblance in methods of technique, as also in the duplication of parts of a design to produce the double or so-called heraldic figures, between these carvings from the Ohio mounds and those from the northwest coast of America.

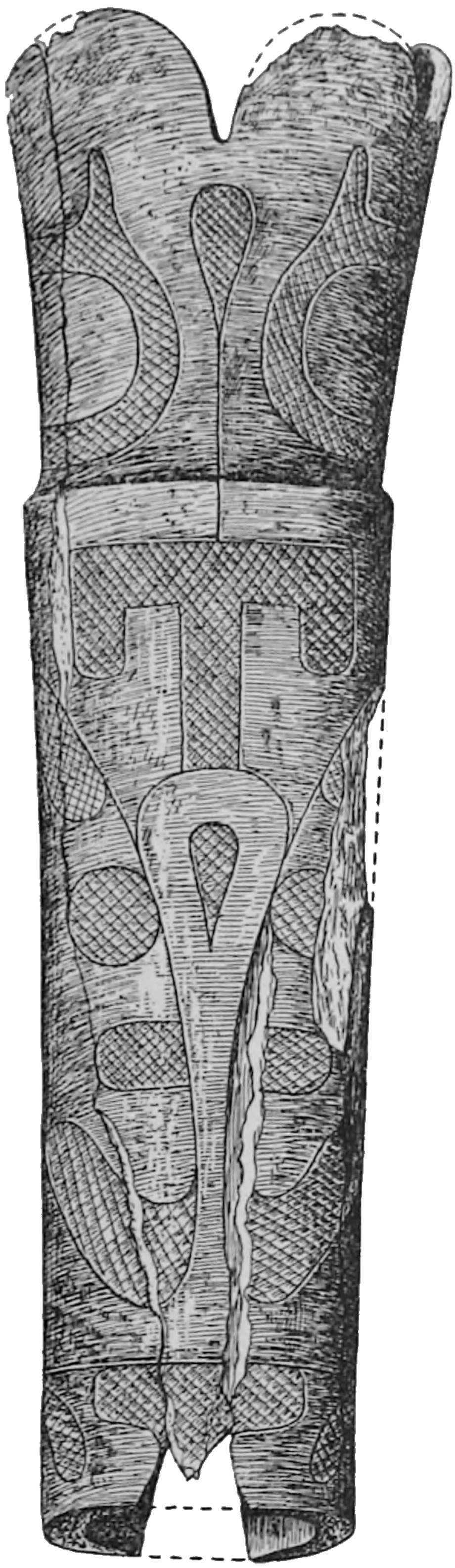
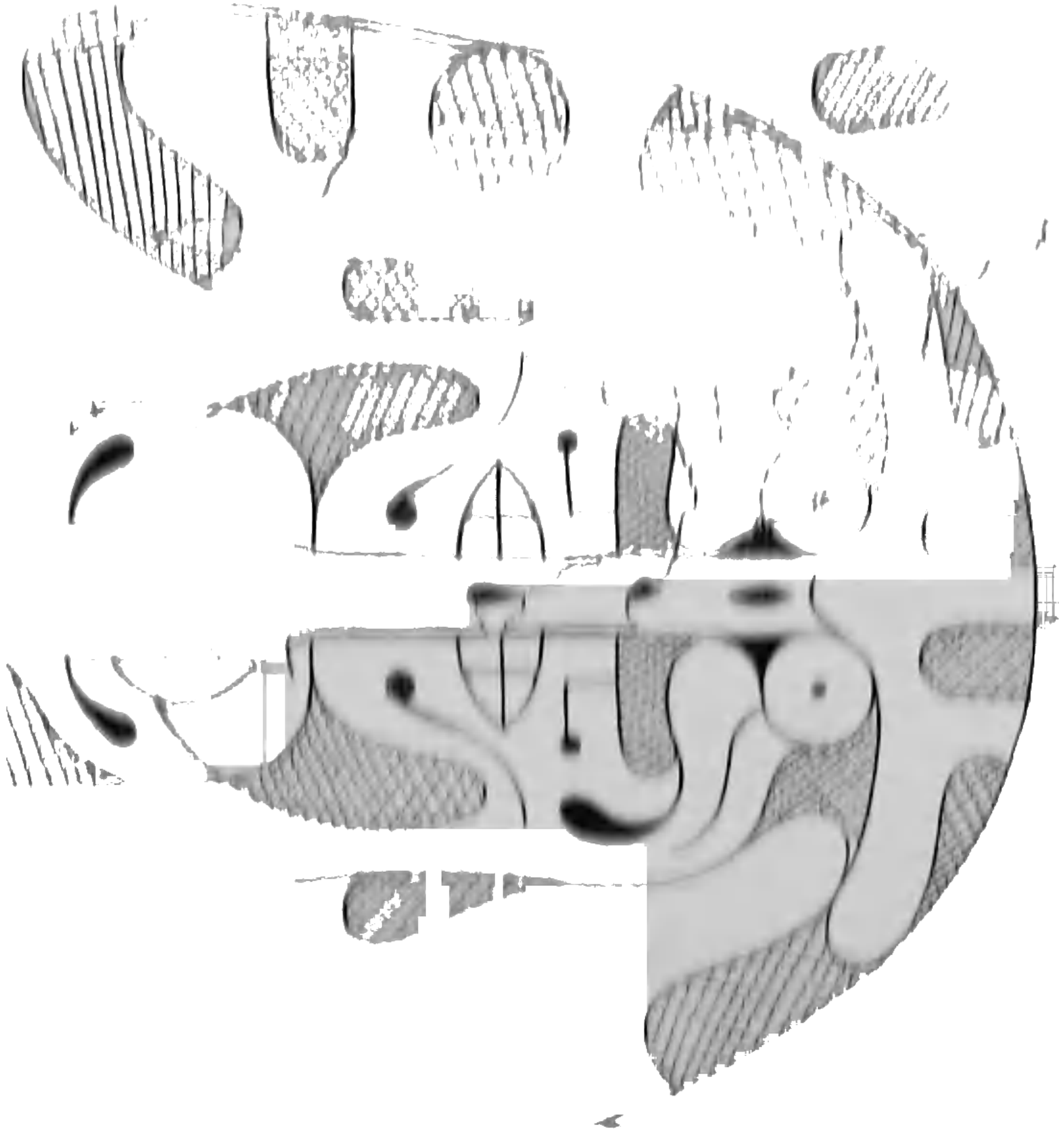


FIG. 1. Incised carving on human femur, Hopewell Mound. $\frac{1}{1}$



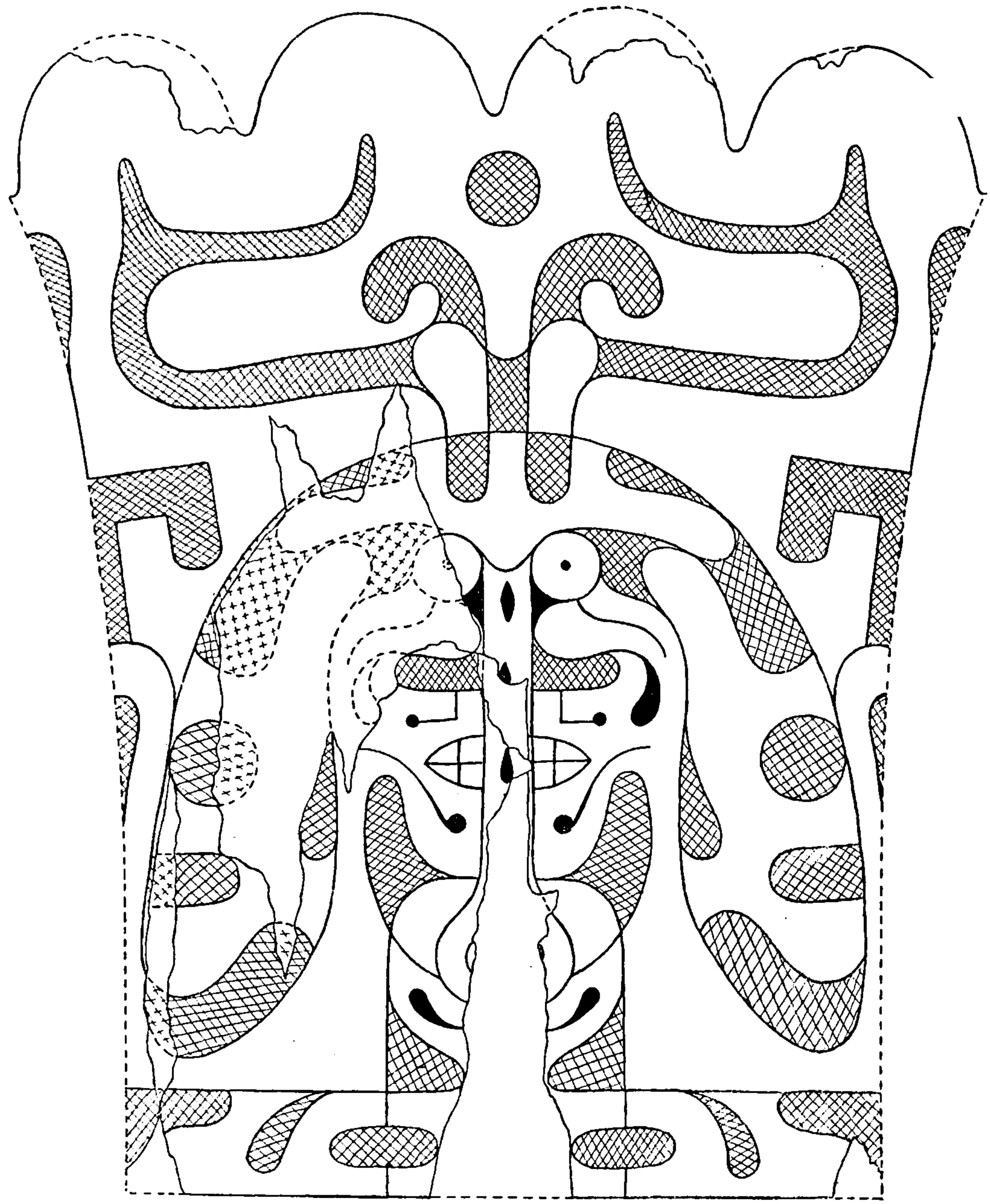


FIG. 2. Tracing from fig. 1. $\frac{1}{1}$

The well-known Cincinnati tablet, here figured, is now the property of Mr. Robert Clarke of Cincinnati, who kindly furnished the photographic reproduction showing the tablet of full size.

The illustrations of specimens from the Hopewell mounds are from the collection now in the Filed Columbian Museum in Chicago. These specimens were obtained by explorations carried on by Professor Putnam while acting as Chief of the Department of Ethnology of the World's Columbian Exposition. The exploration of these mounds was under the immediate direction of Mr. W. K. Moorehead, acting as field assistant.

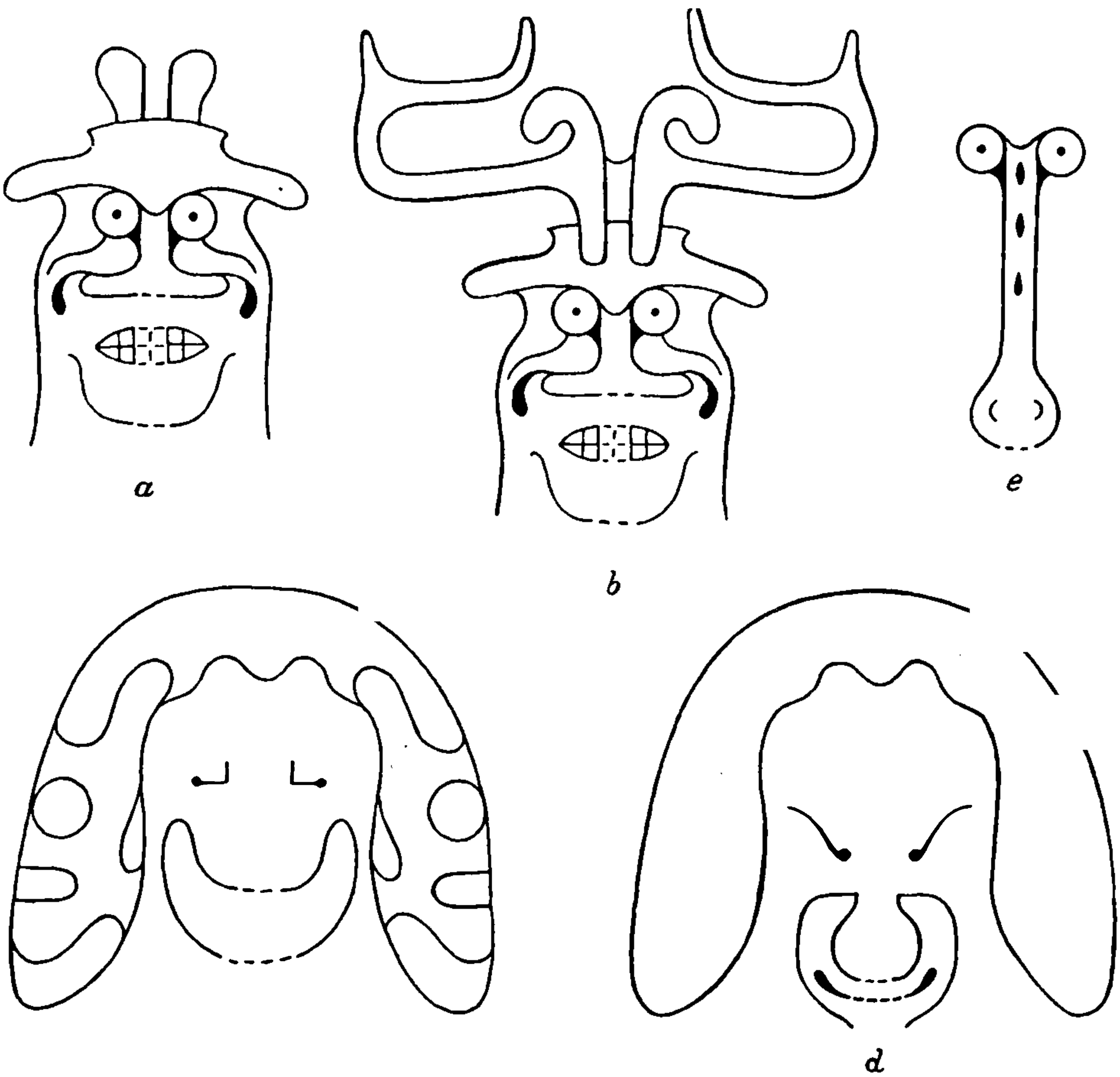


FIG. 3. Tracings from fig. 2. ½

The specimens from the Turner and other mounds of Ohio are in the Peabody Museum at Cambridge, and were obtained during the past twenty years by the explorations of Professor Putnam and Dr. Metz.

The two shell discs from Tennessee are also in the Peabody Museum, and they were obtained during the exploration of mounds, a quarter of a century ago, by Rev. E. O. Dunning, under the direction of the Museum.

Fig. 1 is a carving upon a piece of human femur which had been cut and highly polished. Fig. 2 shows the complicated design forming several heads and faces combined with the symbolic eye of the serpent god, which

is often united with that of the sun god. This close union of the serpent and sun symbols is a characteristic feature of the worship of this great southern group of peoples. Fig. 3 shows several parts of the design separated from the other portions. In this connection, the headdresses found with skeletons in the same mound are of special interest, as we here see the actual use of headdresses of a similar character to those shown in the complicated design carved on the human bone. Figs. 4 and 5 show these headdresses, which are made of hammered copper plates with the antlers of wood covered with thin copper. Fig. 4 represents the growing antlers as in *a* of Fig. 3; and Fig. 5 the full antlers as in *b* of

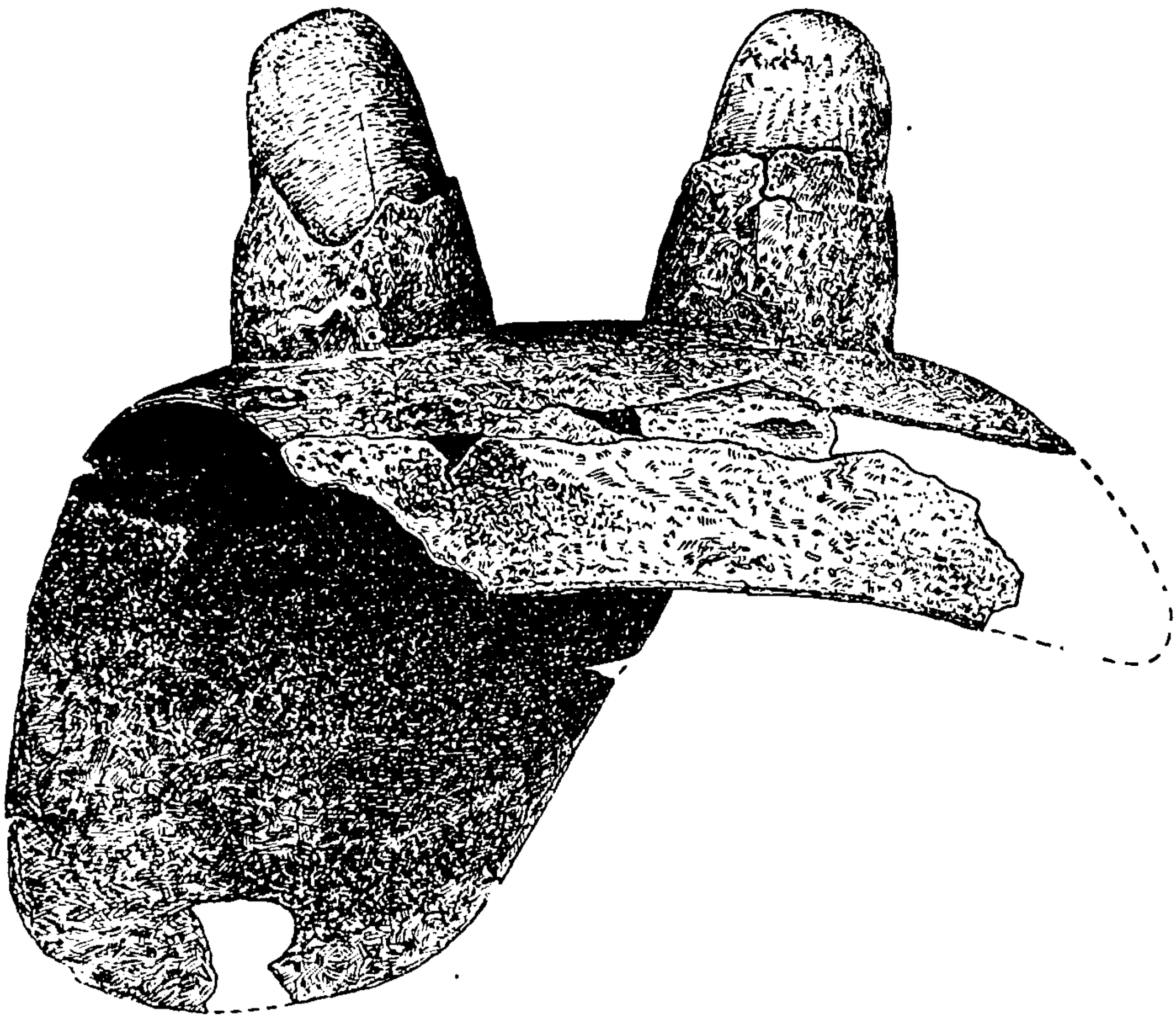


FIG. 4. Copper head-dress, Hopewell Mound. ½

Fig. 3. Fig. 6 represents a single antler of copper which was found in the same mound.

Fig. 7 is the tracing of a complex design incised on the surface of a portion of the ulna from a human arm. The two figures represent the design as spread flat; that is, as if the bone was split from opposite sides, thus showing the combination of lines by which the distinct figures in the design are formed. The lower portion of this bone was destroyed by the altar fire. Fig. 8 is the left hand drawing in Fig. 7 *reversed*. The small figures above Figs. 7 and 8 show the prominent central designs.

Fig. 9 is a piece of human femur with incised designs representing the serpent combined with the bear and other symbols. Fig. 10 shows the

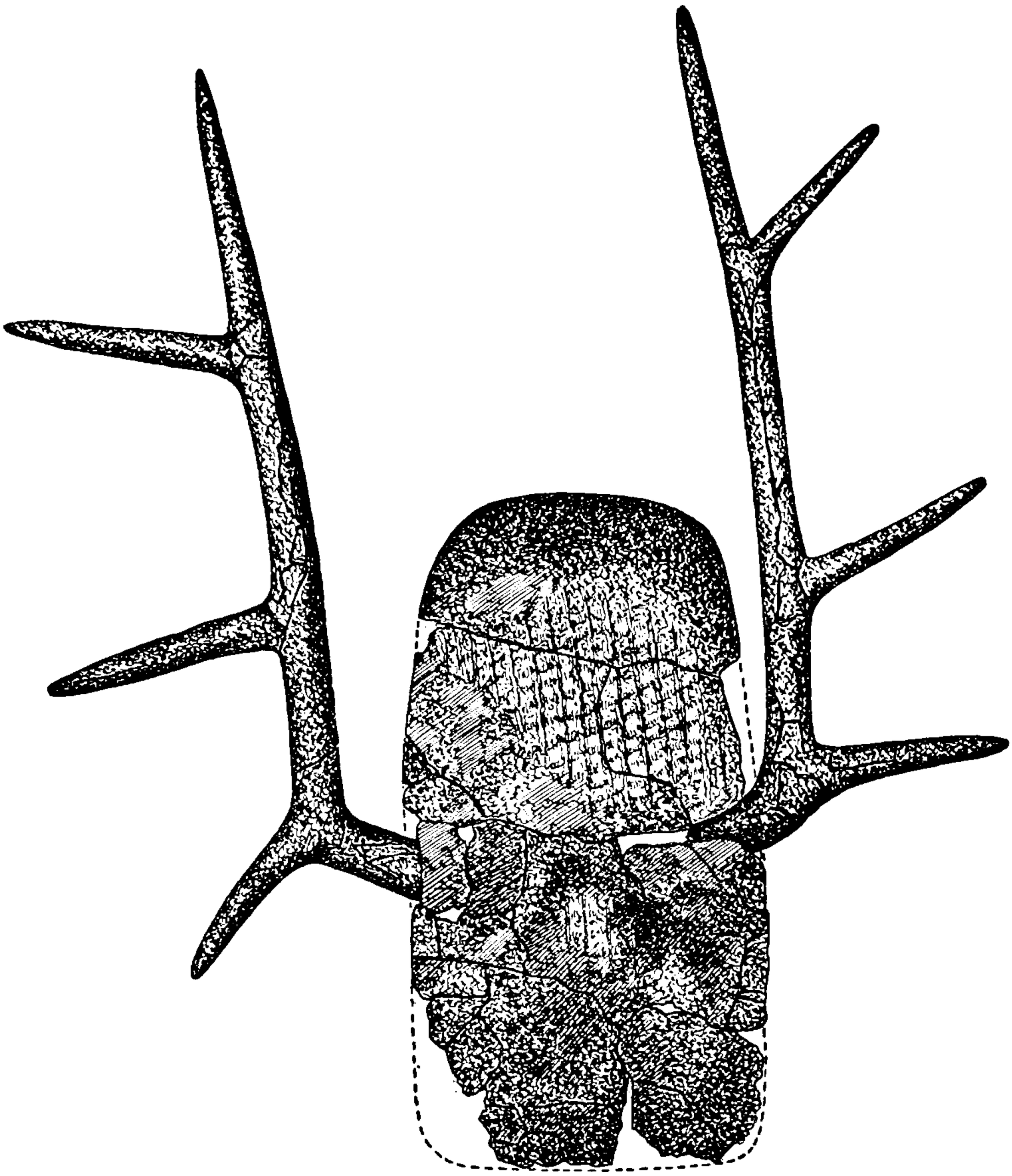


FIG. 5. Copper head-dress, Hopewell Mound. ¼

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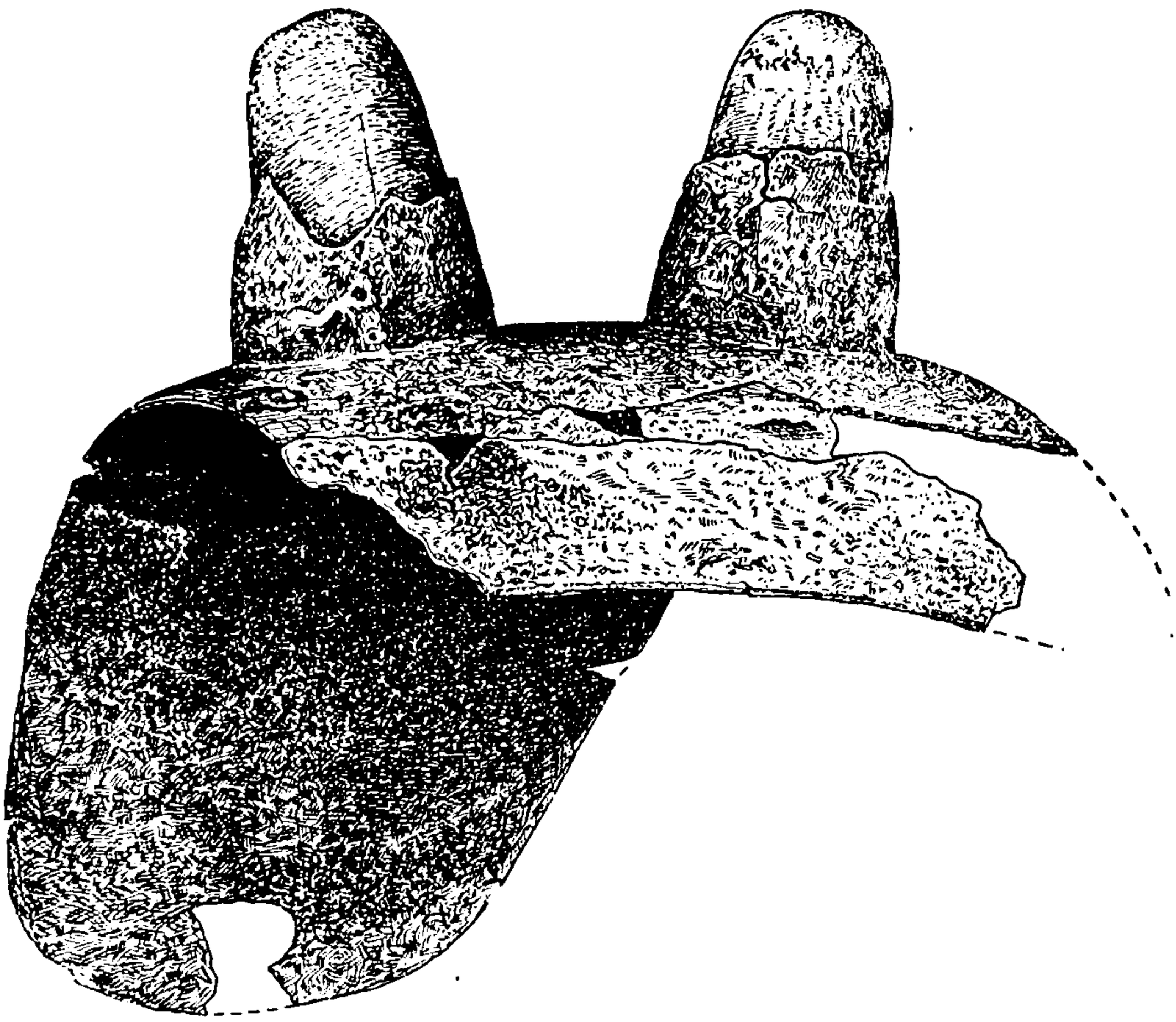

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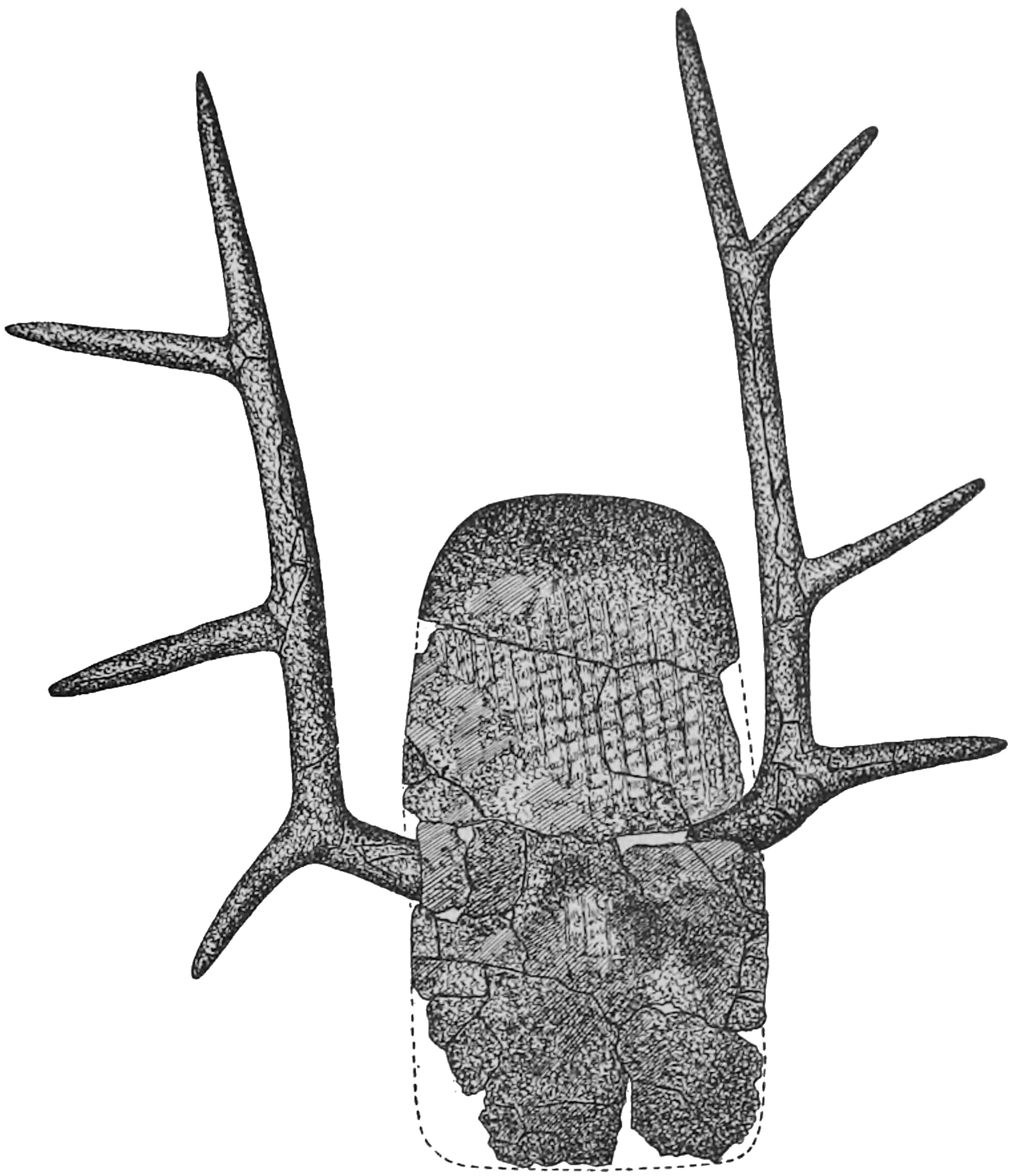


FIG. 5. Copper head-dress, Hopewell Mound. ¼

design as cut through the centre of Fig. 9 and spread flat. Fig. 11 is the serpent symbol combined with that of the sun in the centre, with the symbolic eye forming the scroll on each side. Fig. 12 shows the design in Fig. 9 *reversed*, and is probably the bear and sun symbol combined. Similar designs are expressed in some of the earthworks of the Ohio valley.

Fig. 13 shows the bear and other symbols carved on a piece of antler, and Fig. 14 is the bear symbol cut from a hammered piece of native copper.

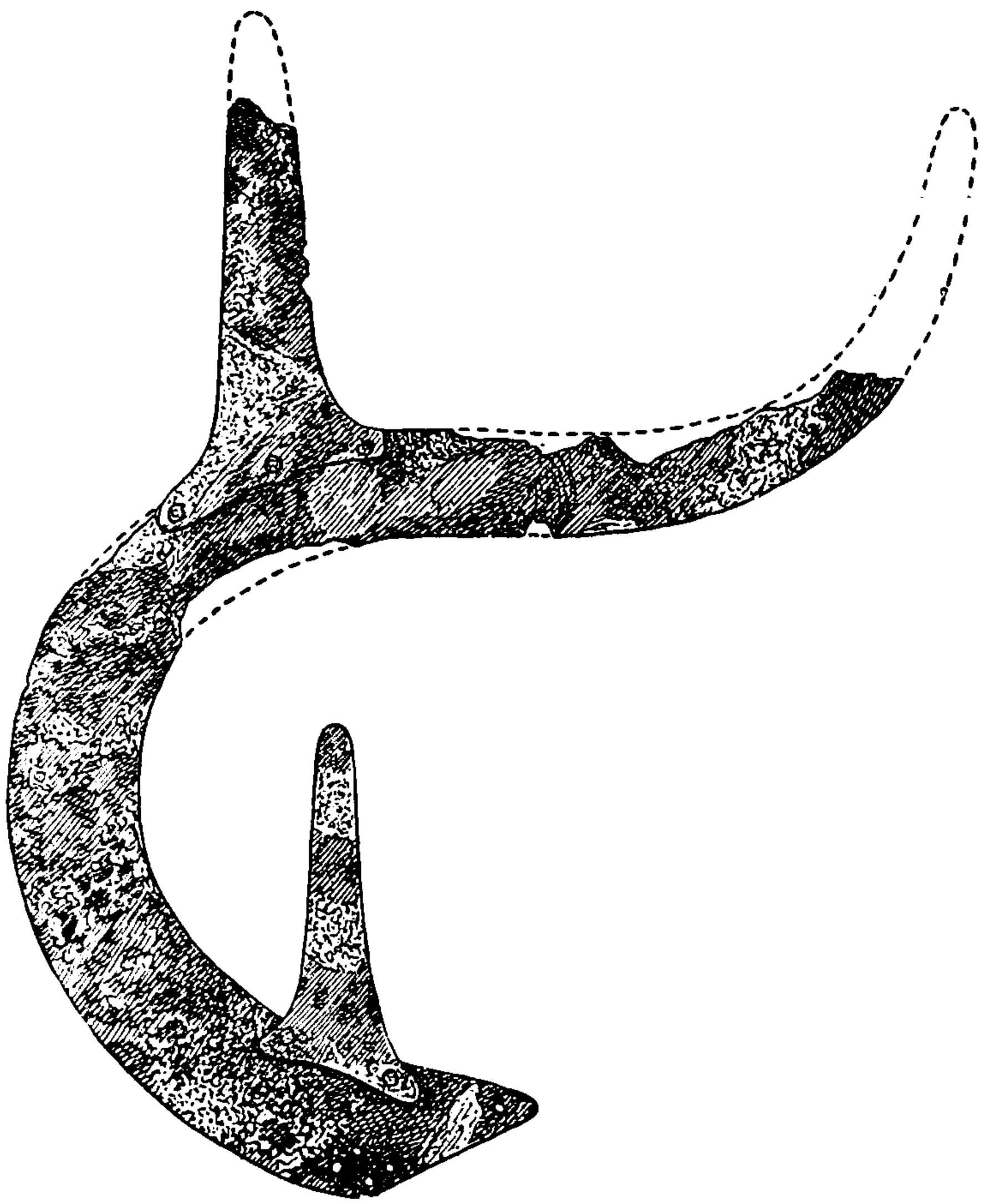


FIG. 6. Copper antler, Hopewell Mound. ¼

Fig. 15 is the "Cincinnati Tablet" showing the serpent combined with the human form. A careful study of this complicated design shows it to be formed on the same principle as those carved on bones. Not only is the duplication of the right and left sides apparent, but there is also a remarkable duplication of the different parts when they are reversed, the right and left and the upper and lower. This is shown in the reduced outlines given in Fig. 16, of which *a* shows the human figure as in Fig. 15. We notice here the ears, *cc*, as straight bars on each side of the head; the eyes, the two dark circles each with two projecting curved

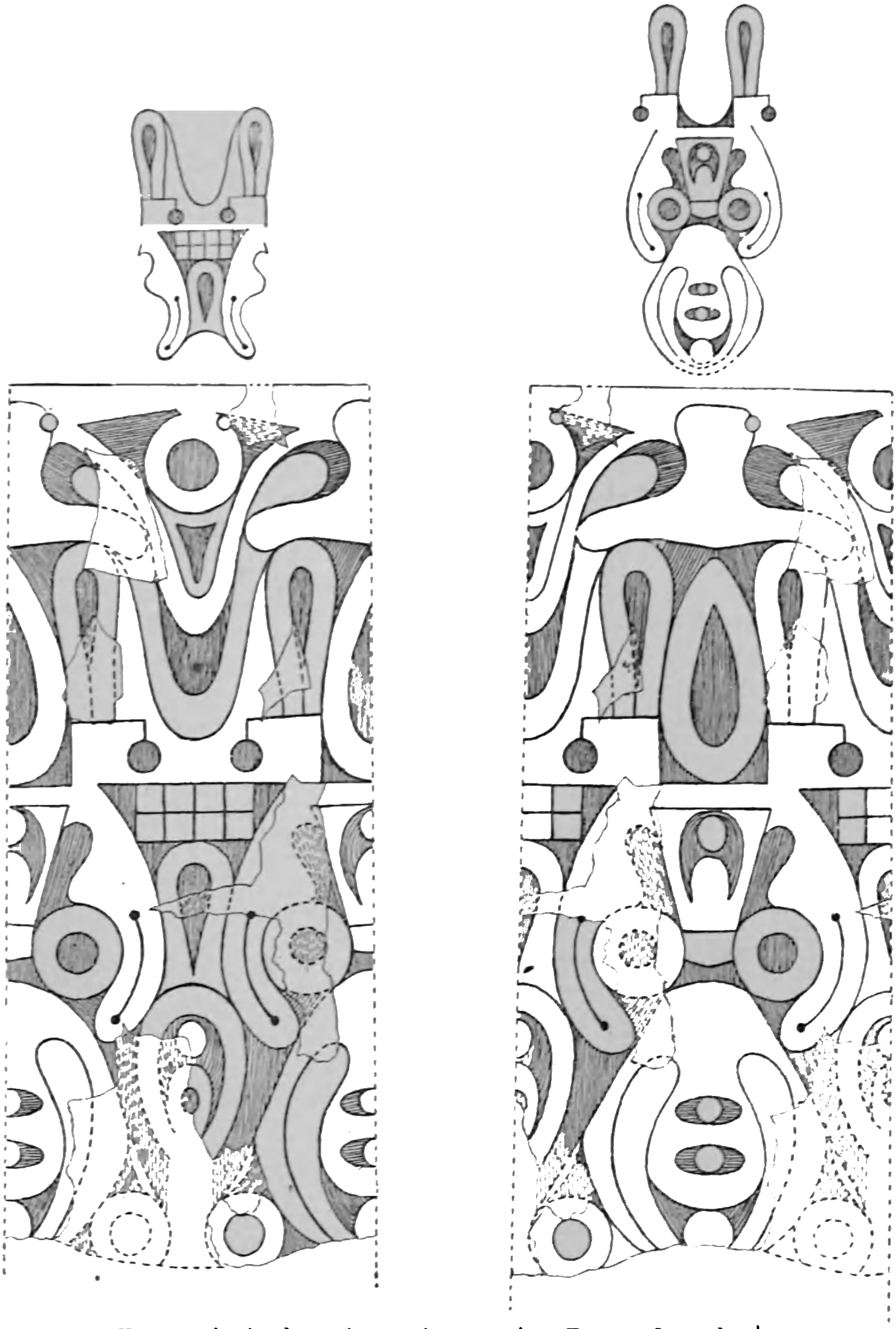
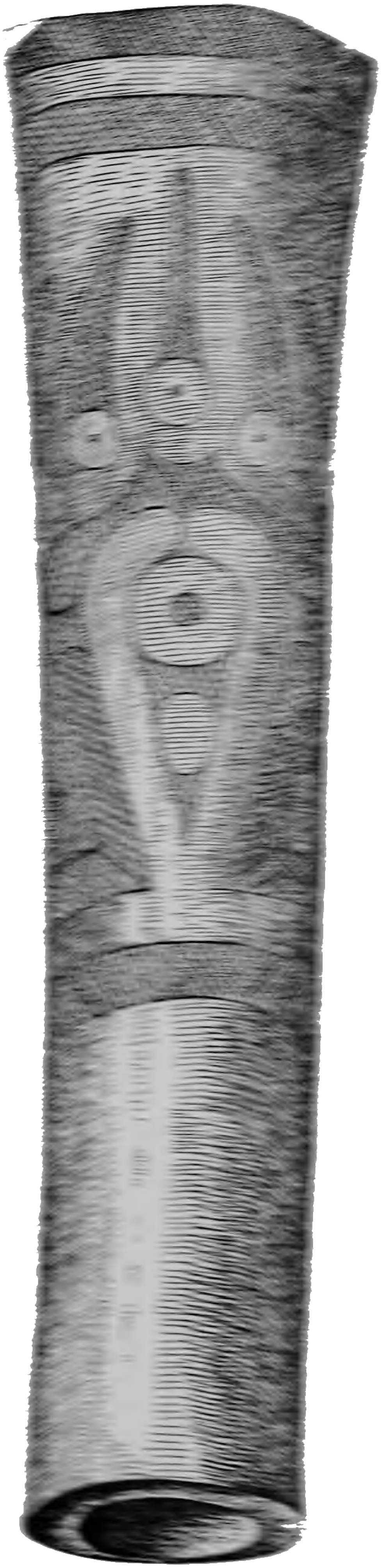
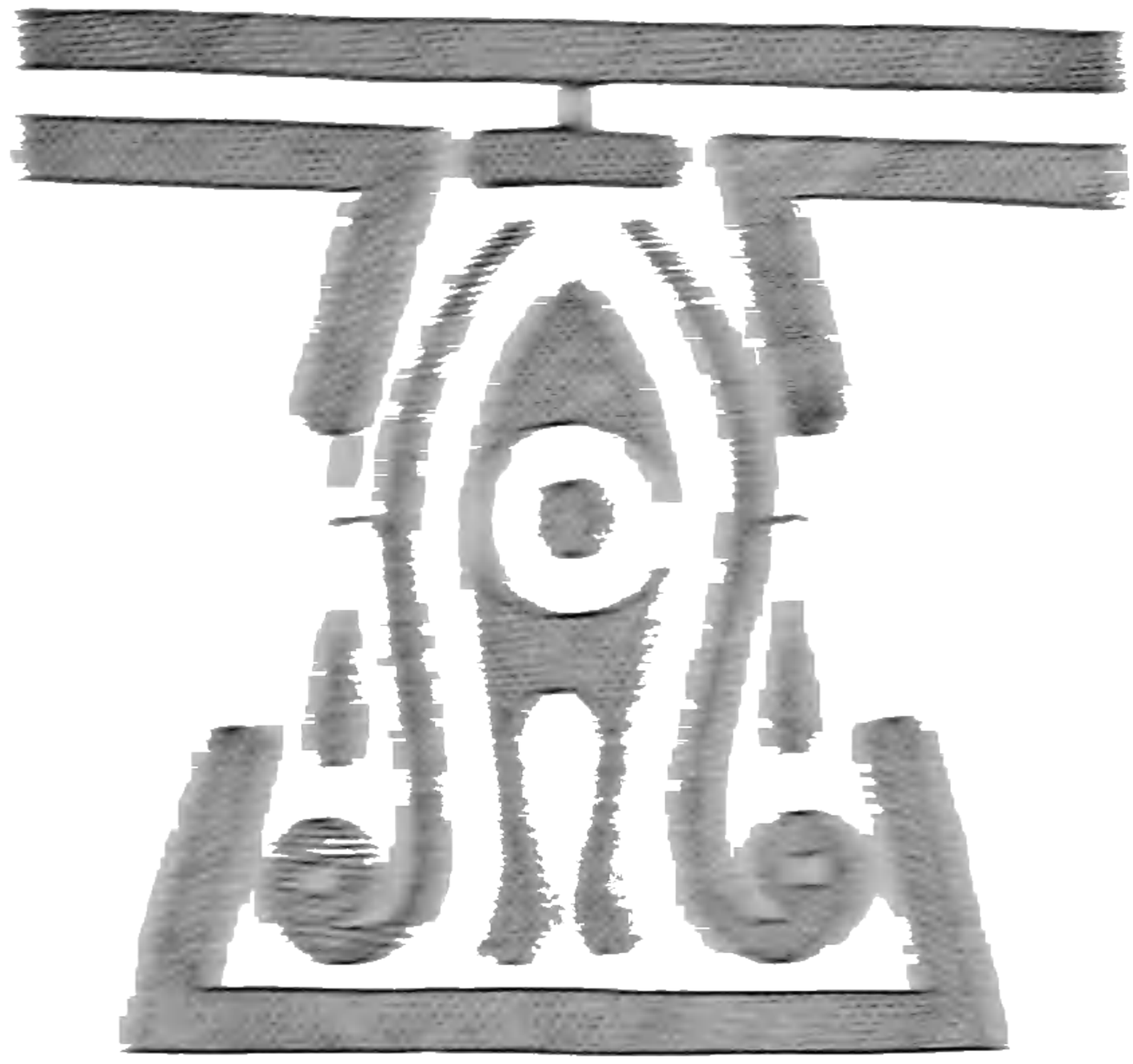
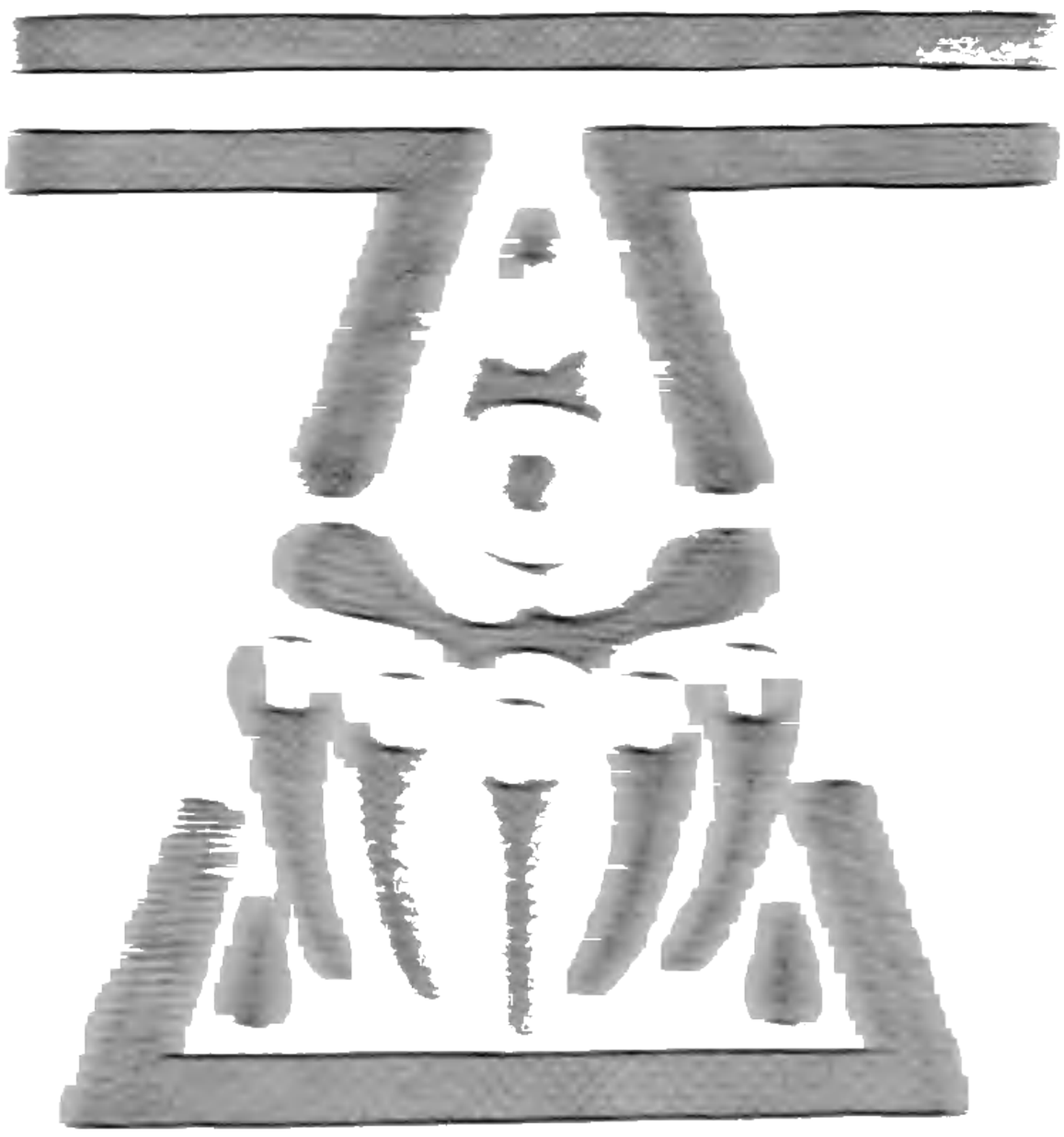


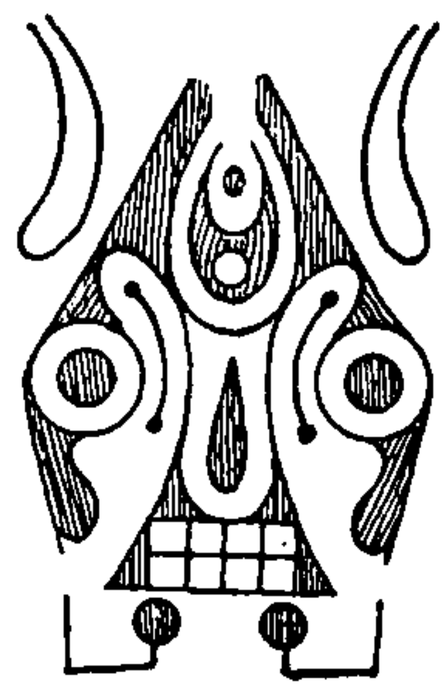
FIG. 7. Incised carving on human ulna, Turner Mound. ½ (308)







arms; the nose, the lozenge-shaped space; and the broad mouth, the transverse white space below. The body includes the two oval figures in the centre, which are duplicates of each other as will be seen by folding the upper over the lower. The arms curve outward and the hands are shown at *dd*, with the fingers pointing inward; the three middle fingers are represented by the trefoil between the long curved thumb above and the long little finger below. The legs project from the lower portion of the body and are bent upwards at the knees, *ff*; the feet with the toes pointing outward, *ee*, are duplicates of the hands. Here the duplication is with the left foot and right hand turned upon each other and reversed; the same with the right foot and left hand; while the duplication is again shown by folding the hands and feet of one side upon the opposite side.



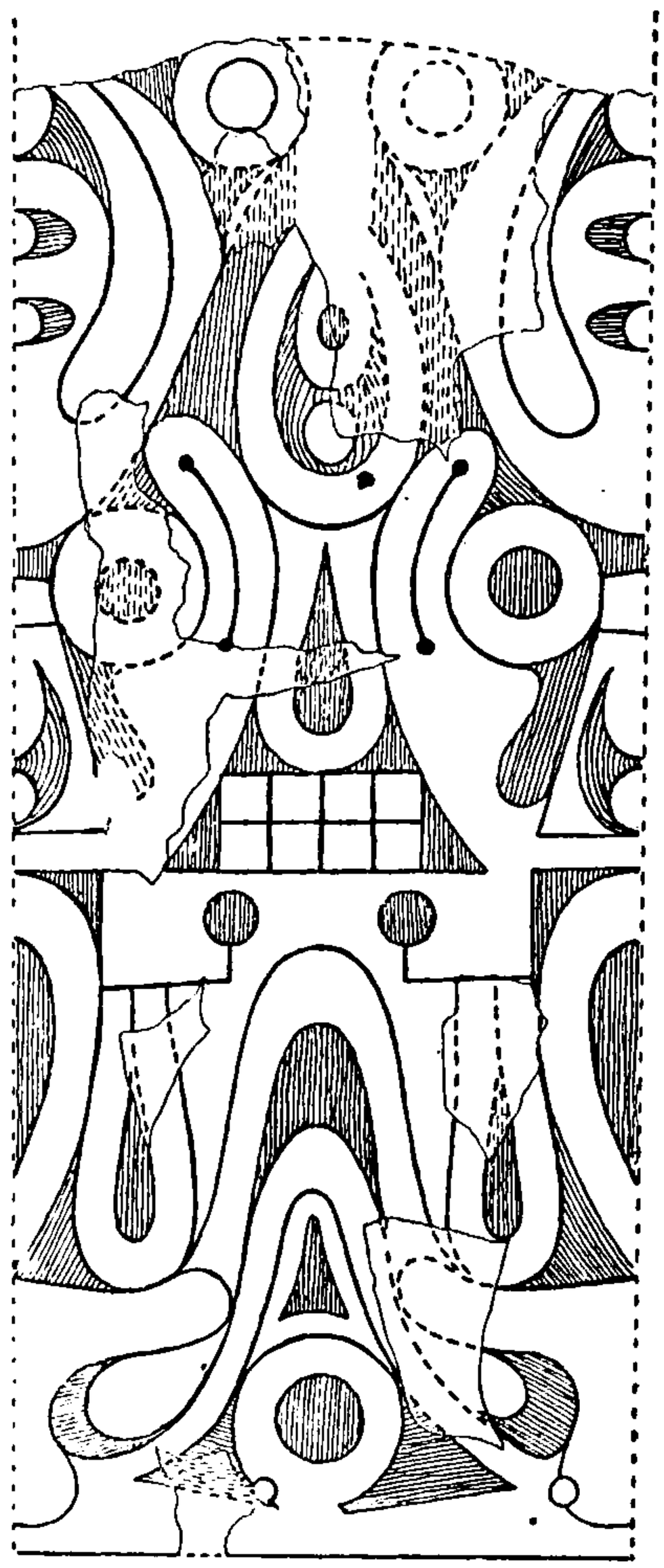


FIG. 8. Reverse of left hand drawing of fig. 7.

In the reverse of this human design, shown in Fig. 16 *b*, the two serpent heads are shown at the bottom of the figure, with the slender necks extending off on each side and connecting with the central portion of the design; *j* indicates the jaw of each serpent head. The symbolic eye with its double arms is seen above the jaw, and the four horns or plumes of the serpent, two above and two below curving backward, are of the same character as shown on many other serpent heads from Mexico and Central America. (See Fig. 27 for various forms of serpent heads.) The double reversal of the several portions of the whole design can readily be seen by following the lines on the opposite sides of these reversed outlines, *a* and *b*.

Fig. 17. In this design, cut from a piece of hammered copper, are the same symbolic serpent eyes and the essential lines of the human face, as in the head of *a*, Fig. 16. The spaces in the human-serpent head of the Cincinnati tablet are represented in the copper design by the seven notches above and below as shown in Fig. 18. The central bar is probably intended for the nose, and the border on right and left sides for the ears.

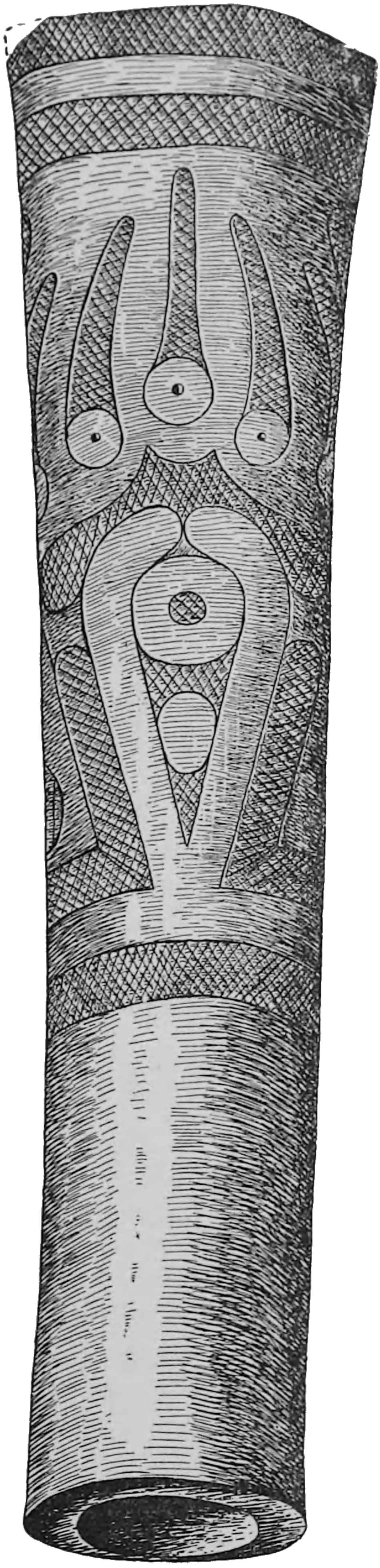


FIG. 9. Human femur, Hopewell Mound. †

(310)

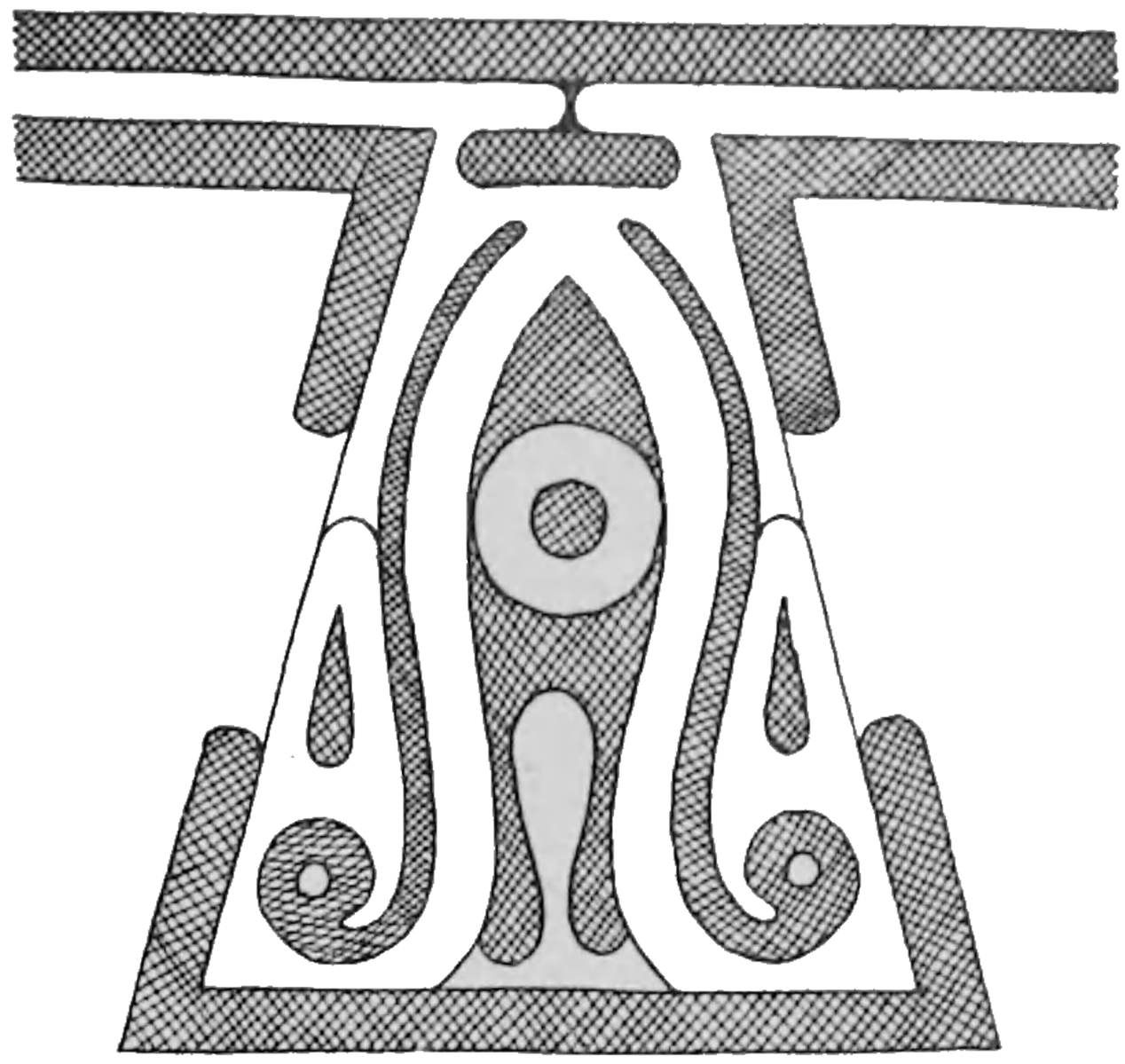


FIG. 11. Serpent symbol from centre of fig. 10. ½

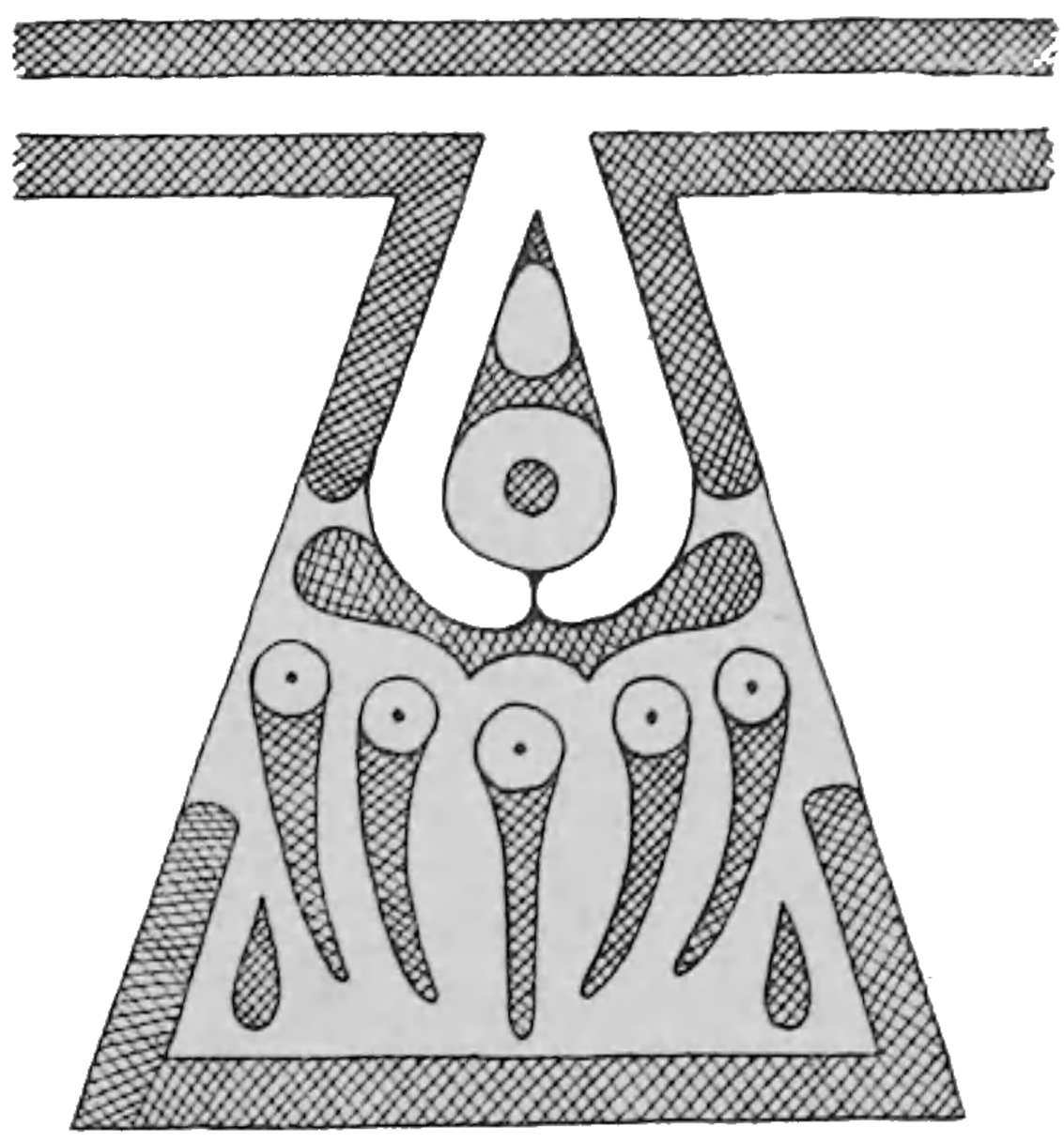


FIG. 12. Bear symbol from centre of fig. 9, reversed. ½

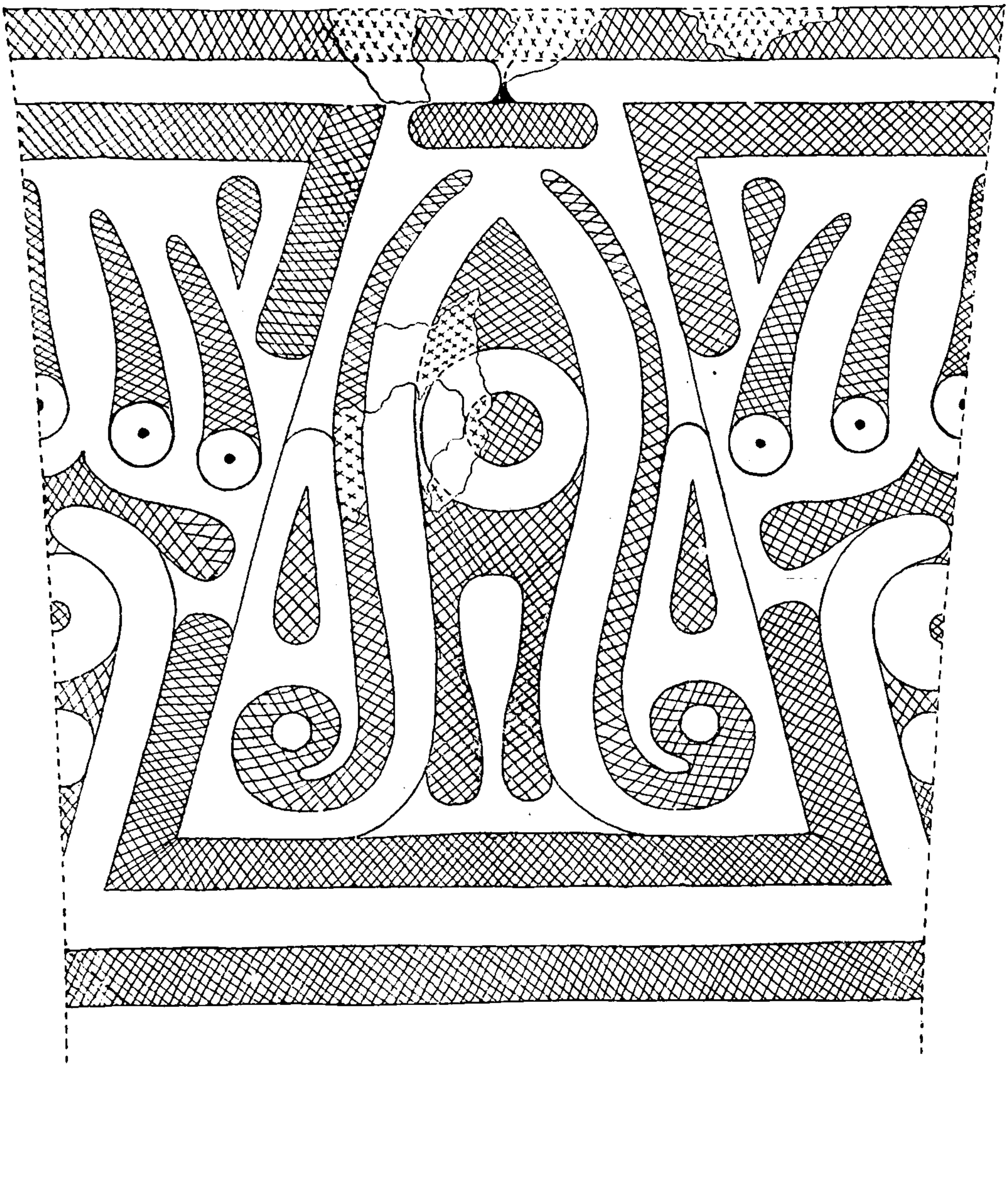


FIG. 10. Design on fig. 9. $\frac{1}{1}$

Fig. 19. This symbolic eye is cut from antler with a large pearl set in the hole in the central portion. The identity of this design with the two similar eyes of the copper piece is evident.

Fig. 20. On this spherical stone the serpent symbol is incised, as shown in Fig. 21, and here, also, the symbolic eye is the principal figure. This eye is also shown in the glyphs on the ancient monuments of Copan, Honduras. (See Fig. 22.) It can also be seen in slightly modified forms in several of the other figures here given in which the serpent is apparent.

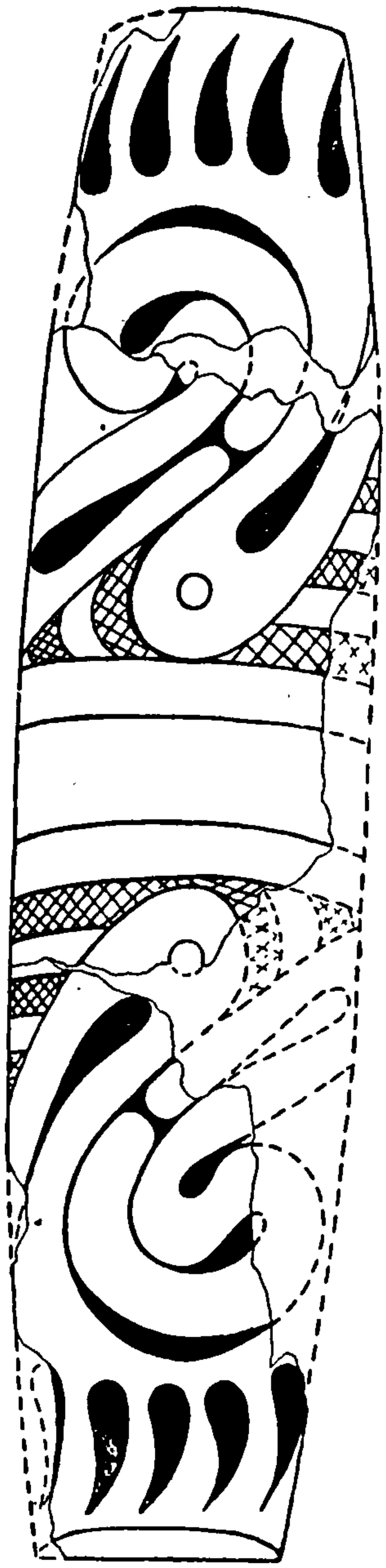


Fig. 13. On antler, Hopewell Mound. ½

Fig. 23 shows the serpent cut from a piece of mica. In this we must probably compare the long arm proceeding from the central portion of the eye with the curved lines meeting at a point in the design on the stone shown in Fig. 21; also with the other representations of this singular symbolic eye.

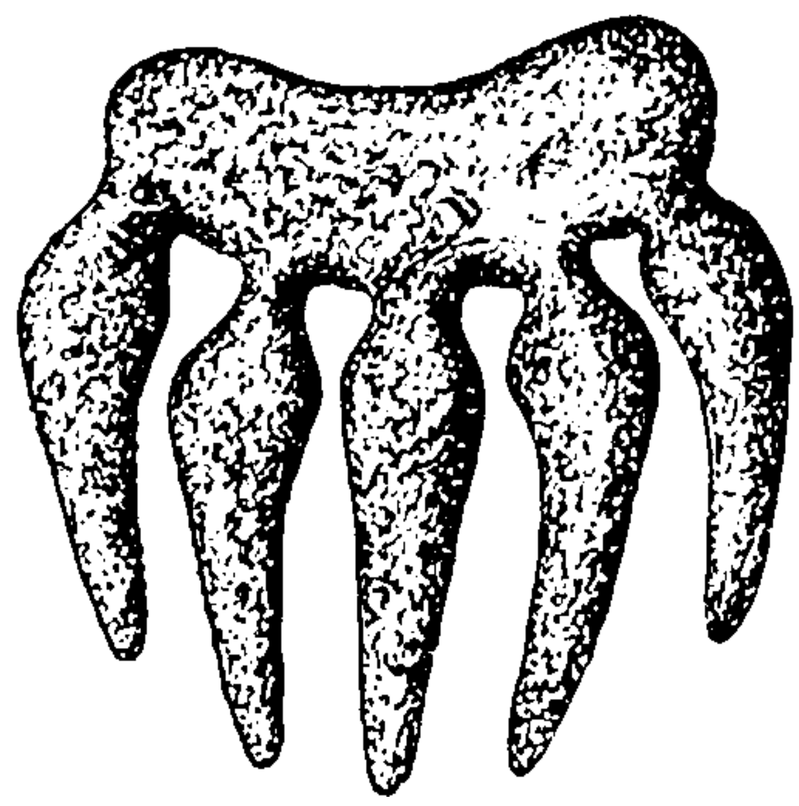


Fig. 14. Copper, Bear symbol, Hopewell Mound. ½

Figs. 24 and 25 are serpents carved on shell discs from mounds in Tennessee. In Fig. 24 the cosmic symbol is combined with the serpent.

Fig. 26. This remarkable piece, cut from a sheet of hammered copper, is not only a representation of the serpent head, but includes also in the design the symbolic eyes, each with the two arms, as in the Cincinnati tablet, and the cosmic symbol with the "four quarters" indicated by the bars issuing from the central sun-circle. This cosmic symbol (see Figs. 28-35), or the sun, four quarters, horizon or boundaries of the earth, and sometimes the water, is common in America as elsewhere, and probably formed a prominent part in ceremonials and in pictographic expressions of various peoples.

FIG. 15. The "Cincinnati Tablet," Mound in Cincinnati. $\frac{1}{1}$

(313)

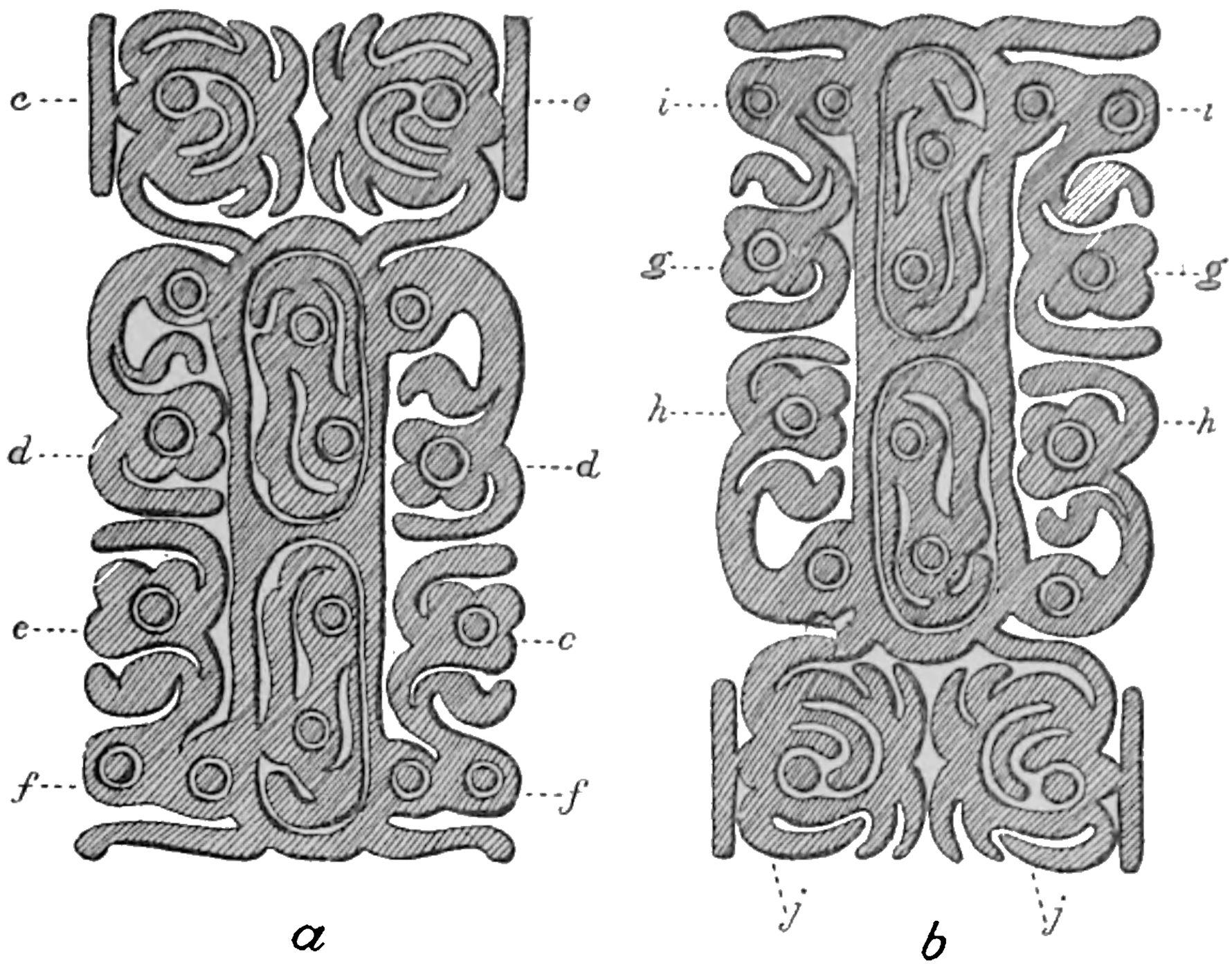


FIG. 16. Outlines of figures on Cincinnati Tablet, ½. *a*, Human figure; *b*, reversed showing serpent heads at bottom.

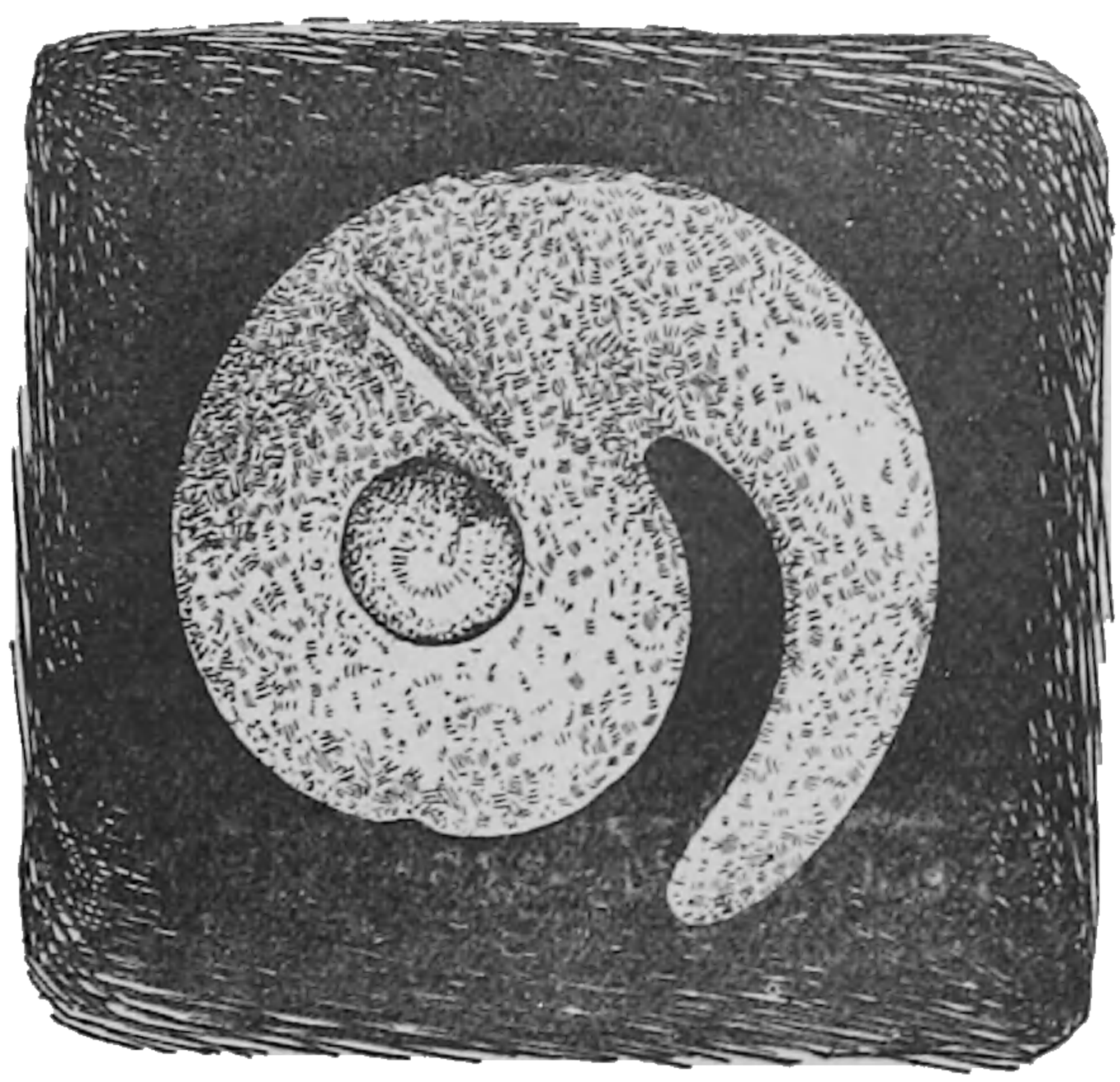


FIG. 19. Cut from a piece of antler with a large pearl inserted. Grave under Mound of Turner group. ¼

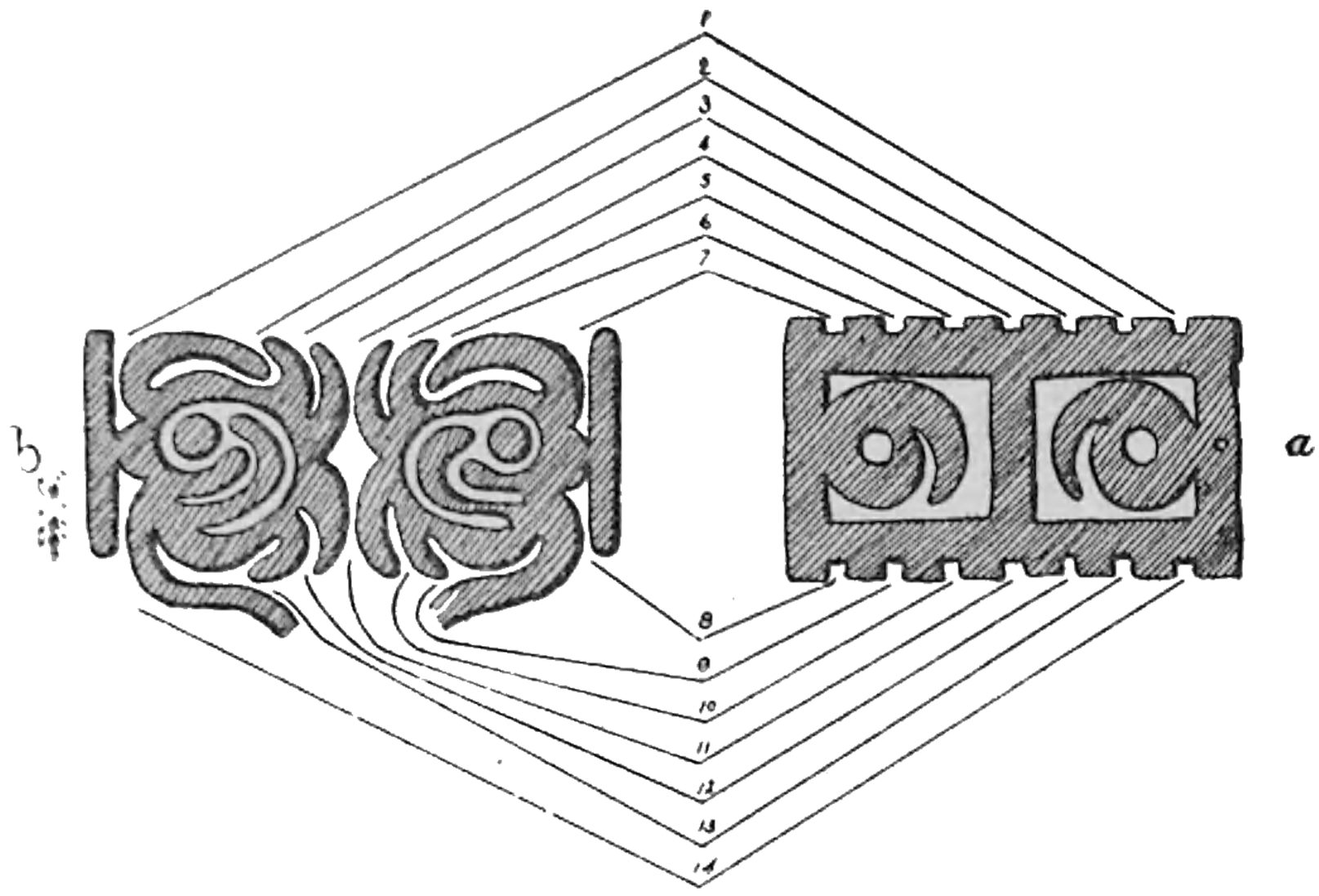


FIG. 18. *b*, from Cincinnati Tablet; *a*, the same symbols cut from copper.

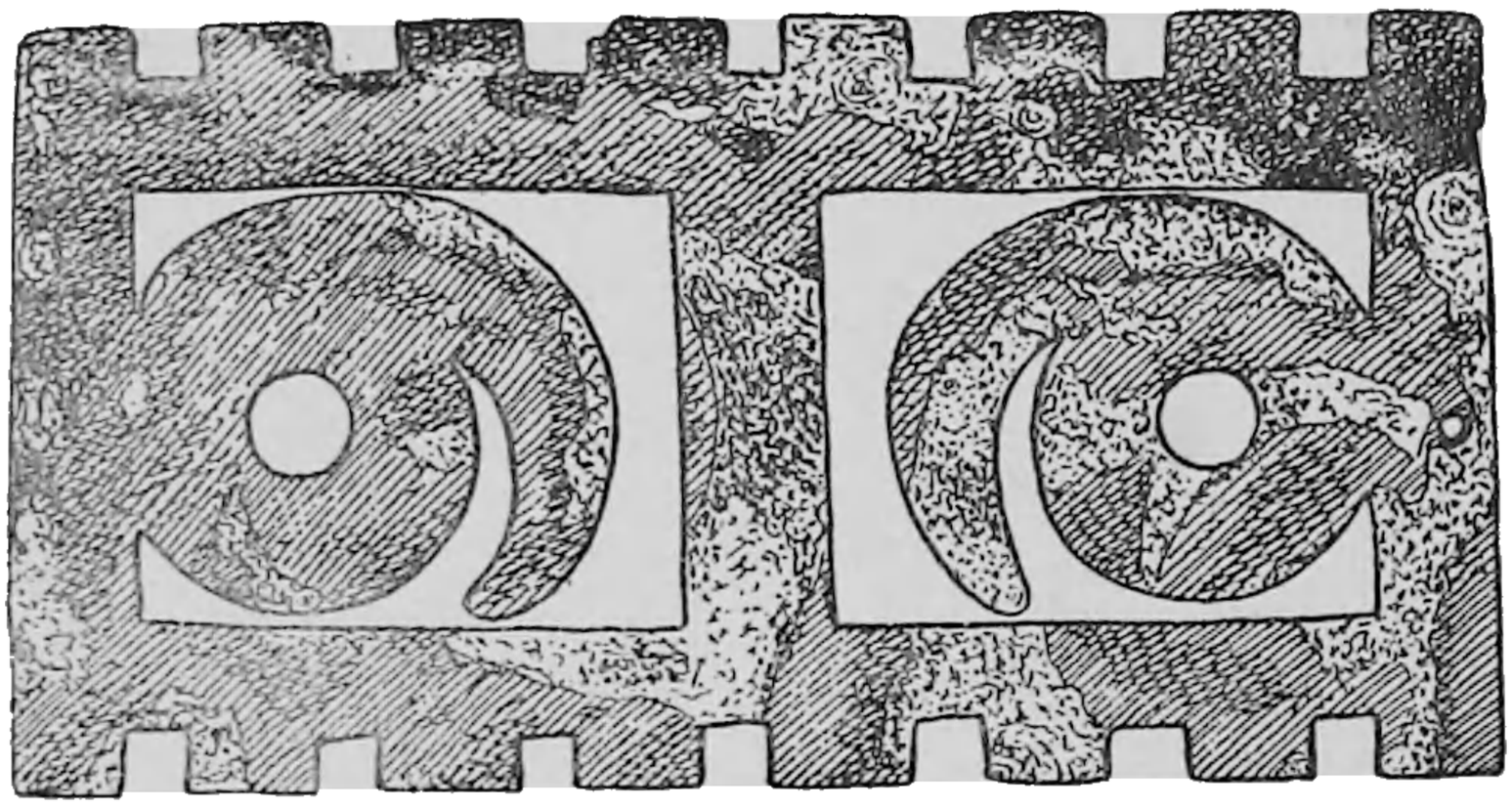


FIG. 17. Copper, Hopewell Mound. ½

FIG. 20. Carved stone, Liberty group, Ohio. ¼

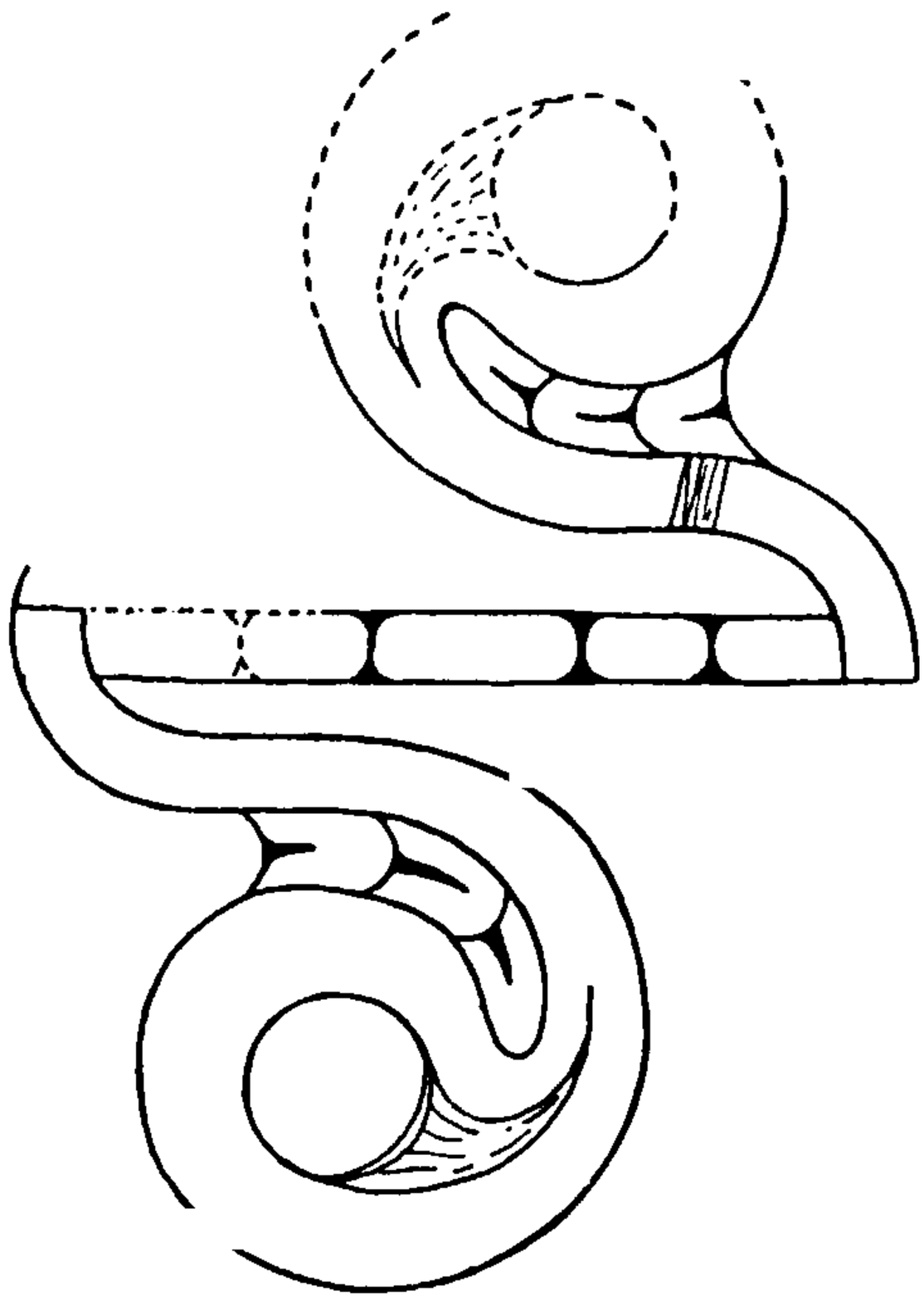


FIG 21. Serpent symbol carved on stone (fig. 20). $\frac{1}{2}$

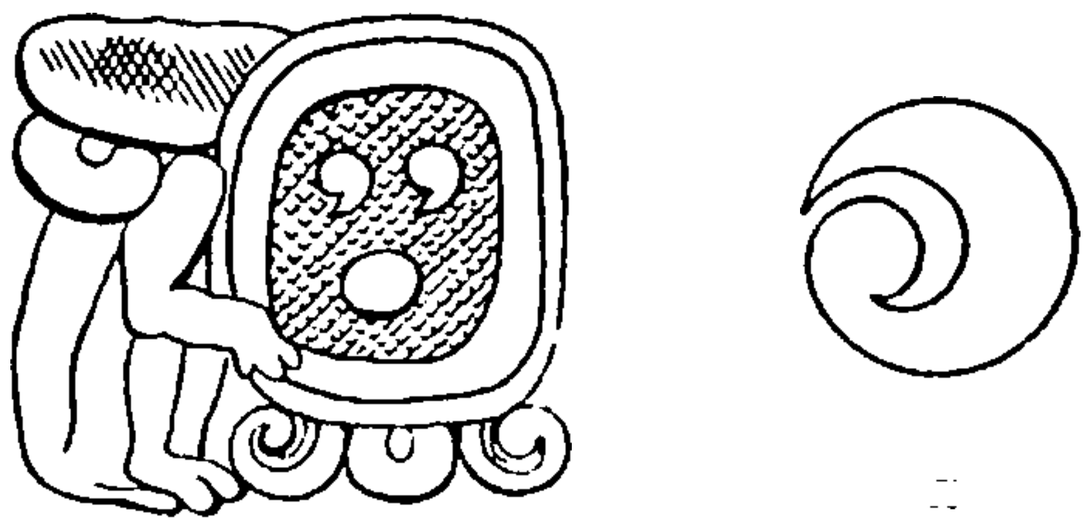


FIG. 22. A glyph on monument, Copan, Honduras; *a*, the symbolic eye.

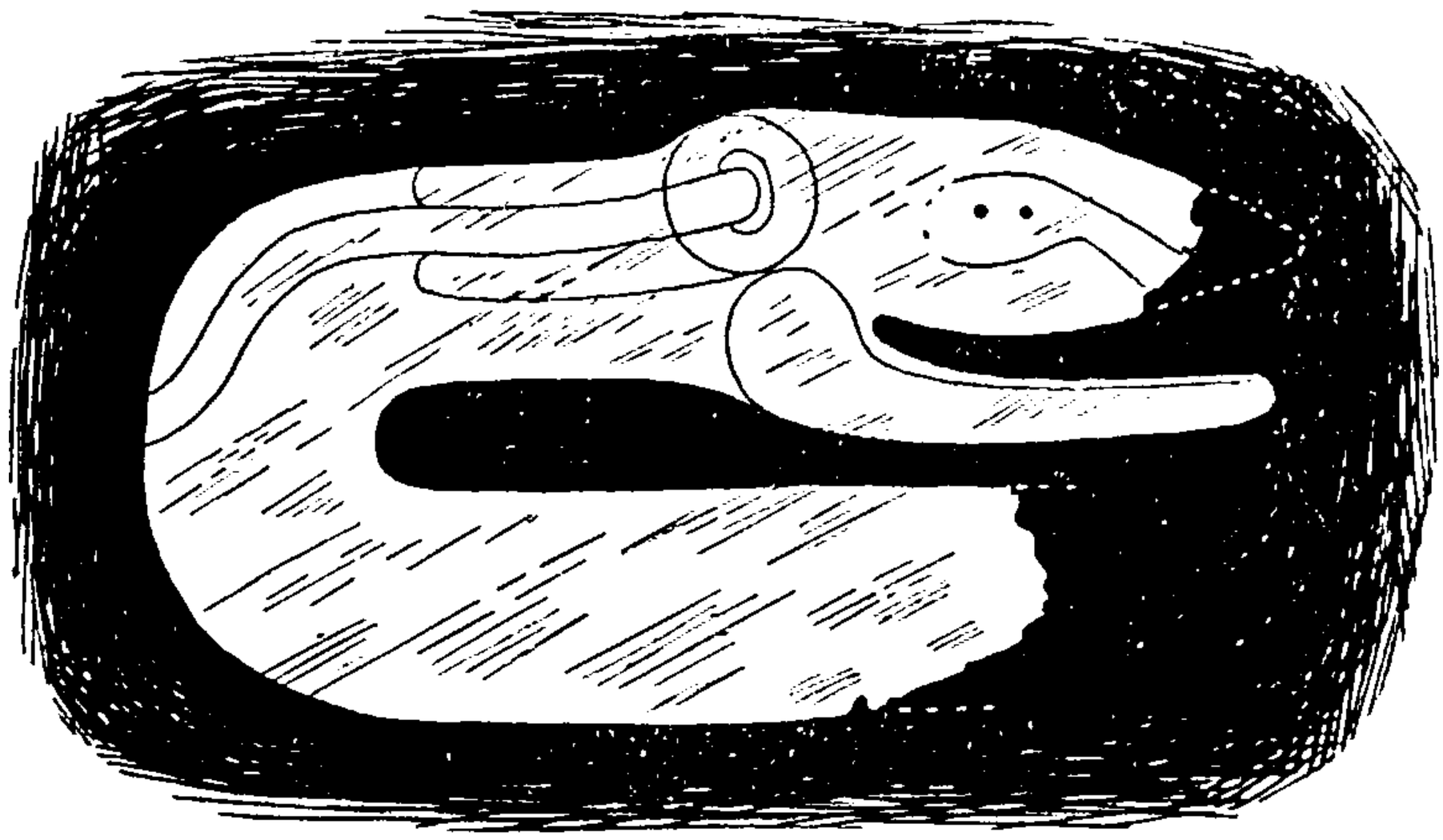


FIG. 23. Cut from mica, Turner Mound. $\frac{1}{5}$

FIG. 25. Shell disc, Brakebill Mound, Tenn. ½

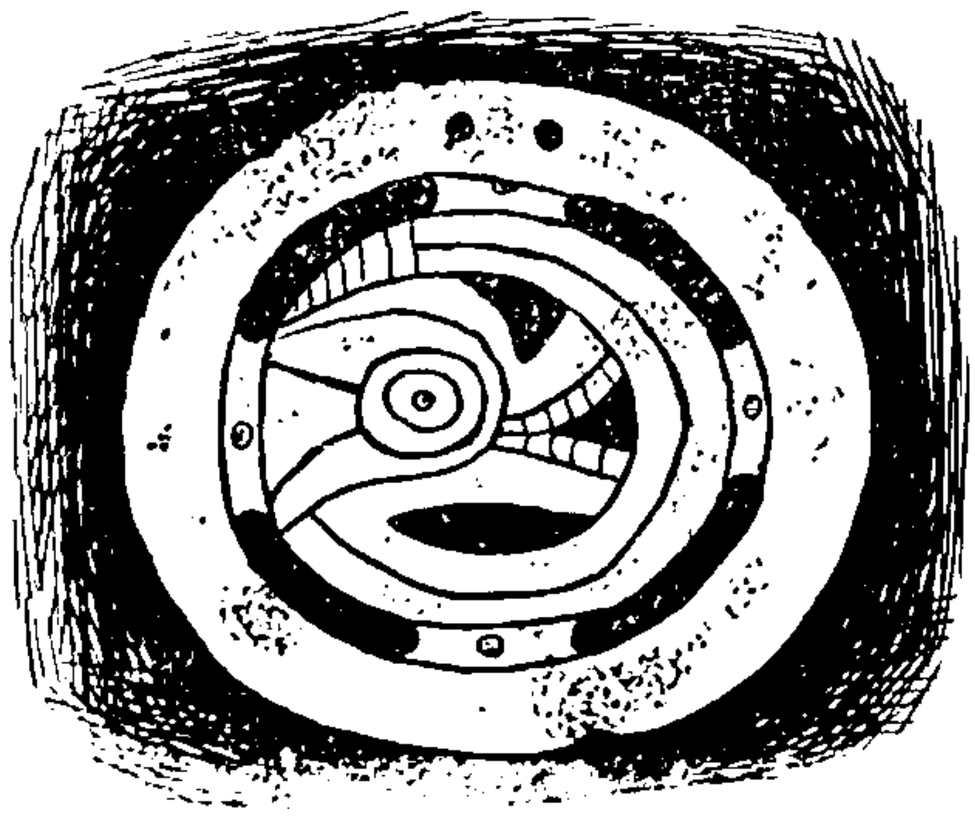


FIG. 24. Shell disc from Lick Creek Mound, Tenn. ½

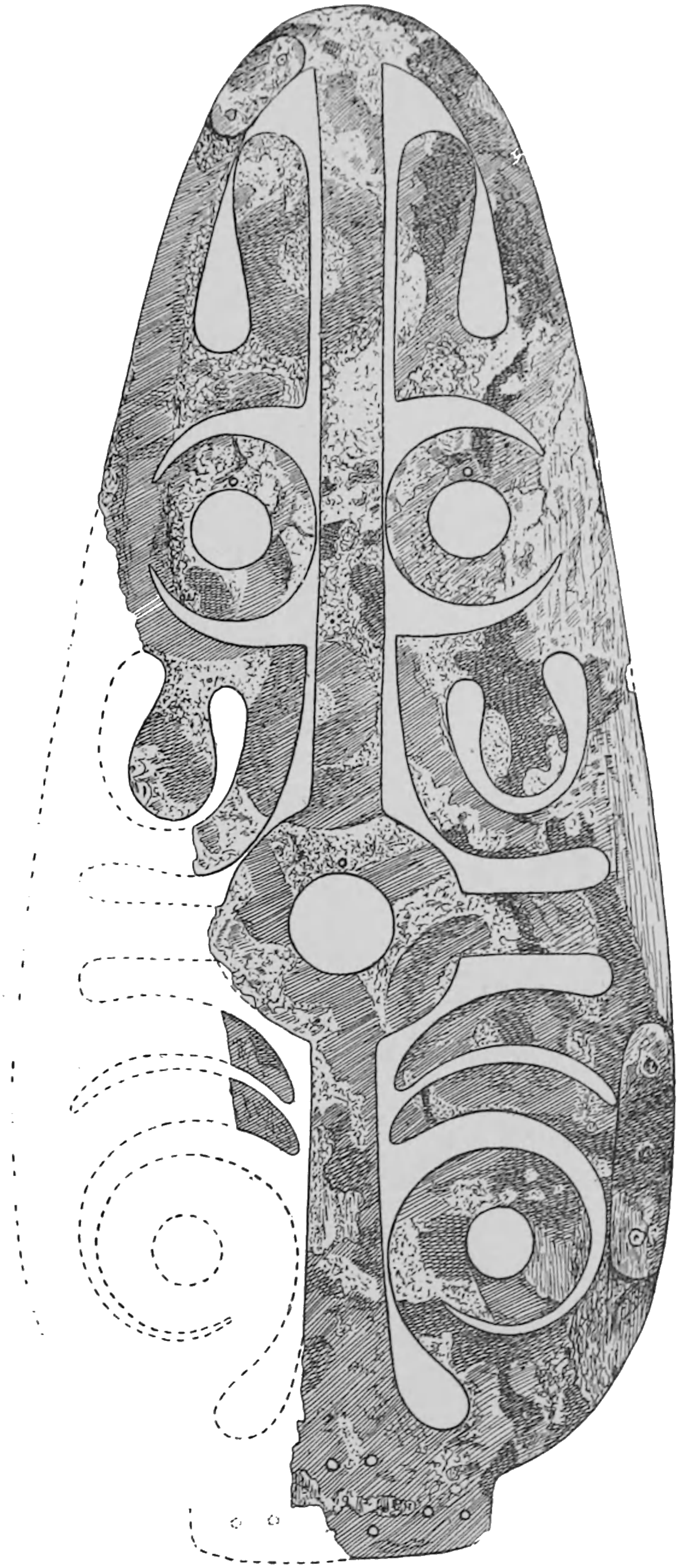


FIG. 26. Cosmic and Serpent Symbols combined. Copper, Hopewell Mound. ¼

(318)

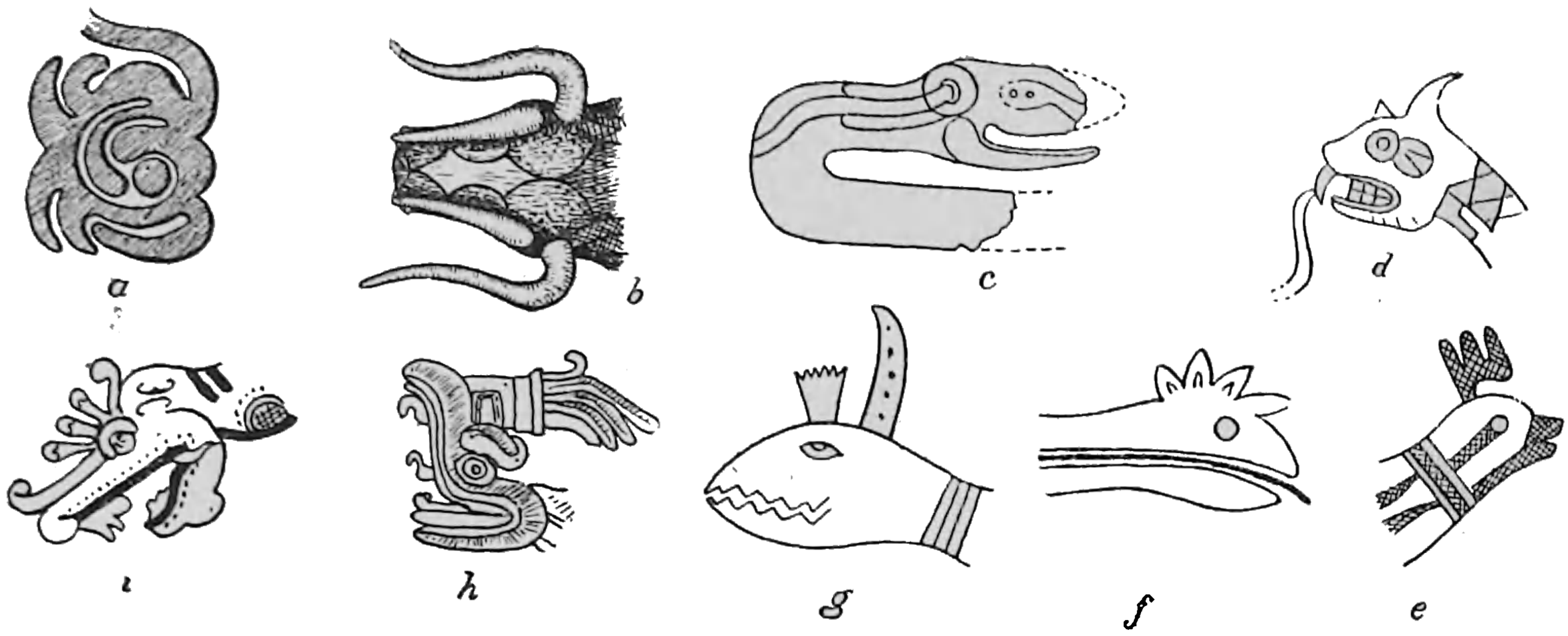


FIG. 27. Various forms of Serpent heads; *a* Cincinnati tablet; *b*, stone carving from Turner Mound, Ohio; *c*, cut in mica, from Turner Mound, Ohio; *d*, on a stone disc, from mound in Alabama; *e*, on pottery vase from mound in Arkansas; *f*, painted on pottery vase from New Mexico; *g*, from a rock-carving in Arizona; *h*, from a Mexican manuscript; *i*, from a Maya manuscript.

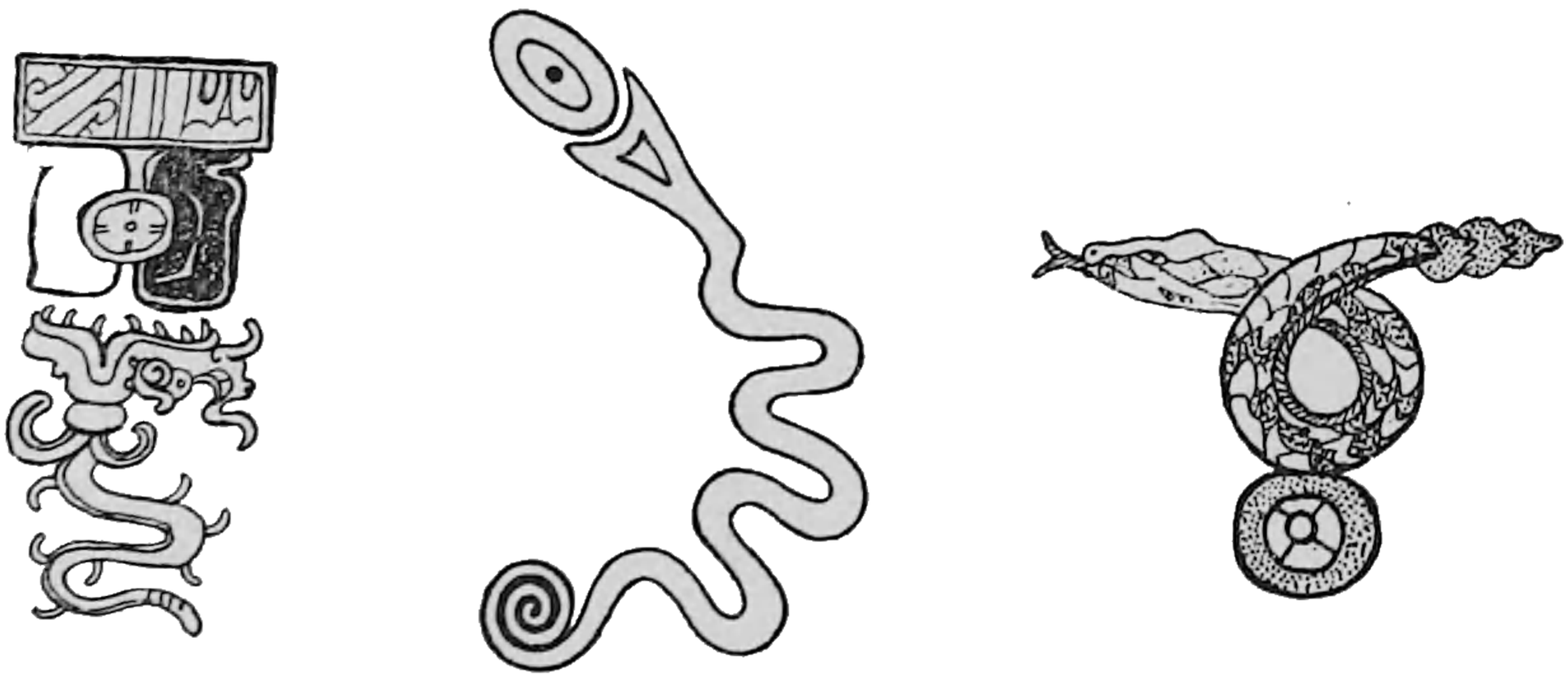


FIG. 28. Serpent and Cosmic symbols combined. Right hand figure, from Mexican MS.; middle figure, the Serpent Mound, Ohio; left hand figure, Maya MS.

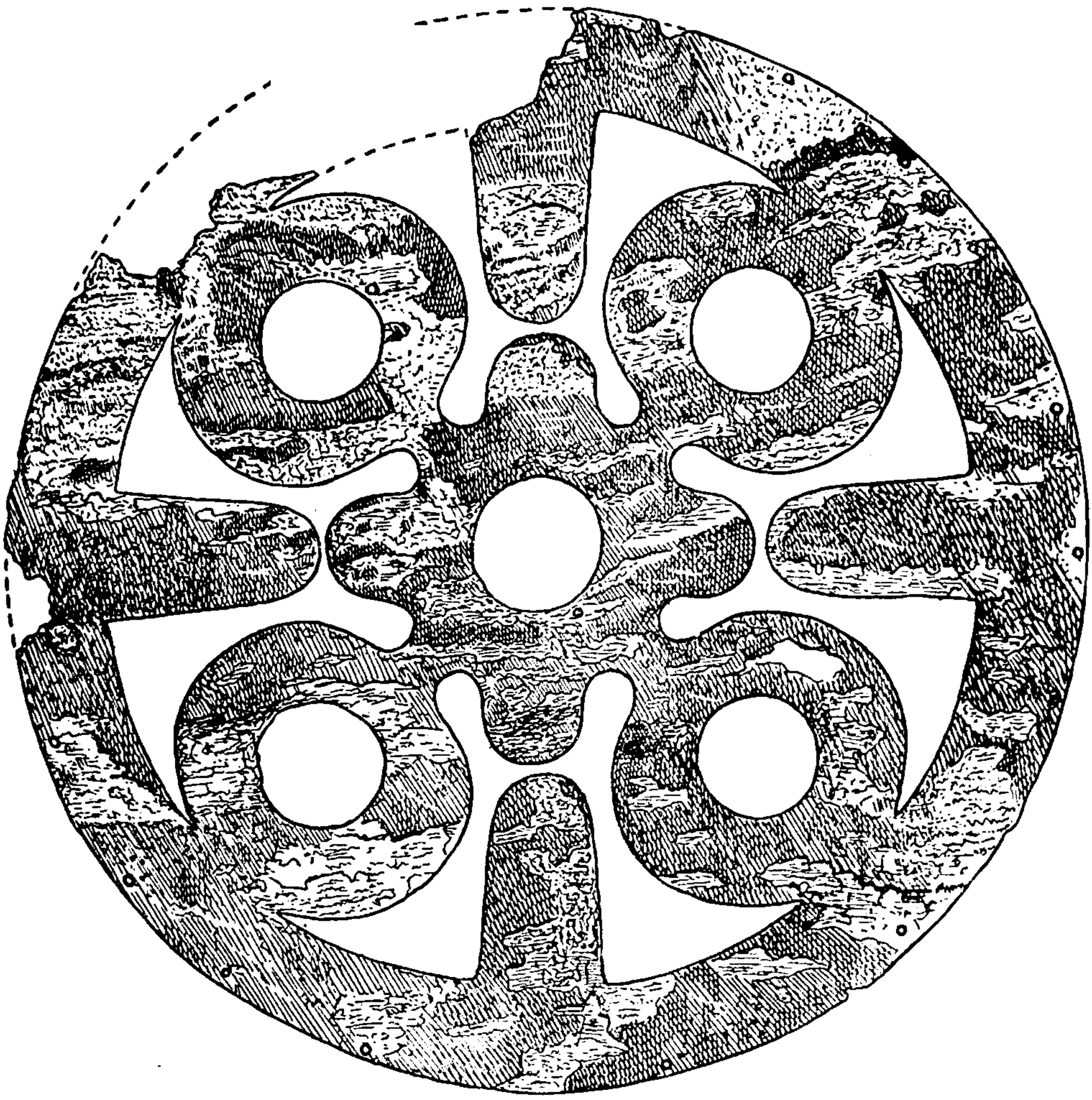


FIG. 29. Cosmic symbol, copper. Hopewell Mound. ½ (320)

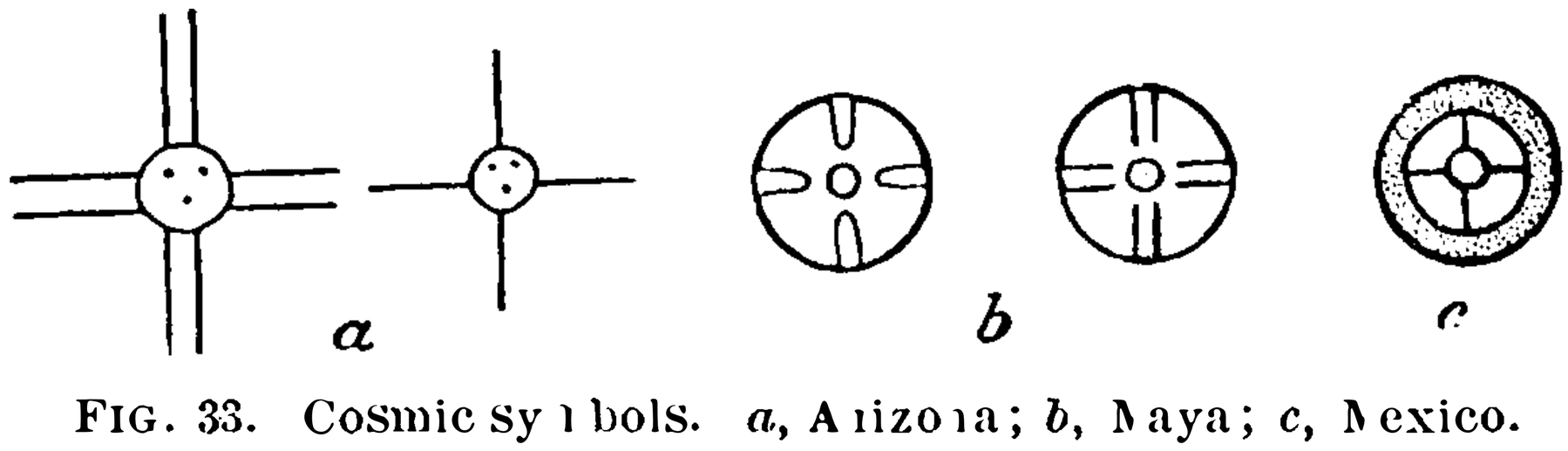


FIG. 33. Cosmic symbols. *a*, Arizona; *b*, Maya; *c*, Mexico.

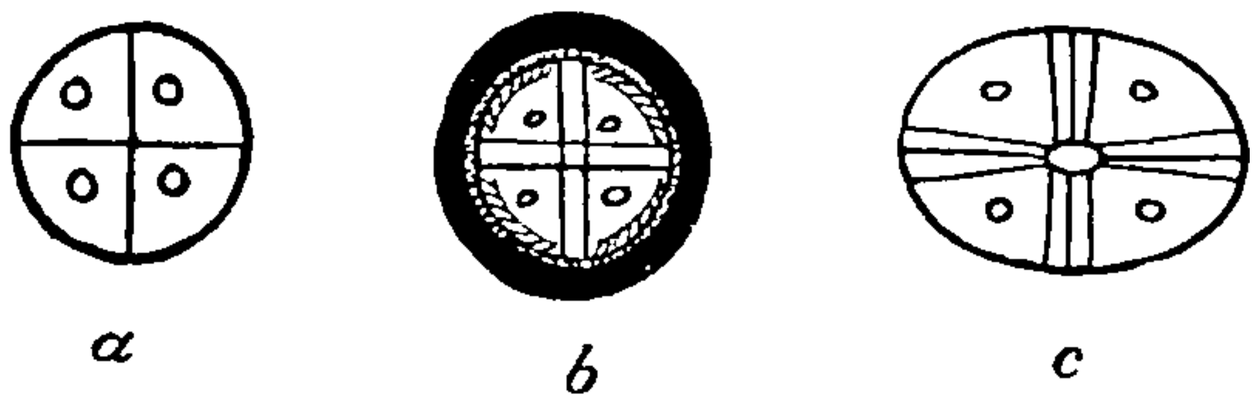


FIG. 32. Cosmic symbols. *a*, *c*, Maya; *b*, Copan.

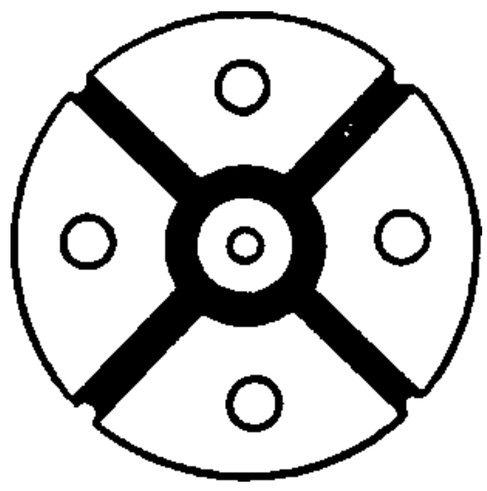


FIG. 30. Cosmic symbol on ear ornament of copper. Ohio.

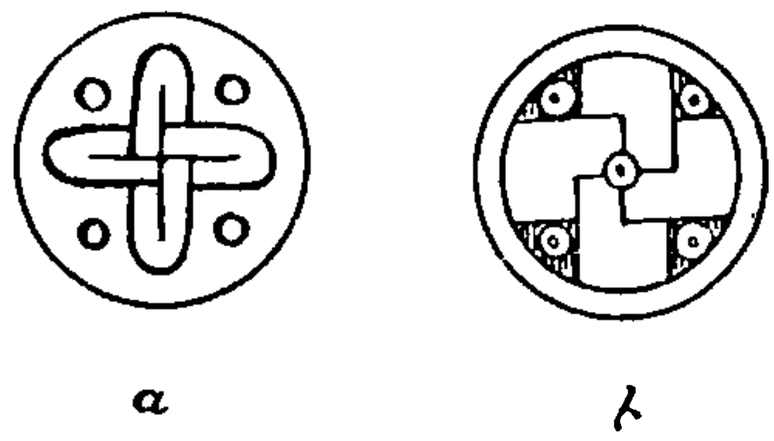


FIG. 31. Cosmic symbols. *a*, Mexico; *b*, Tennessee.

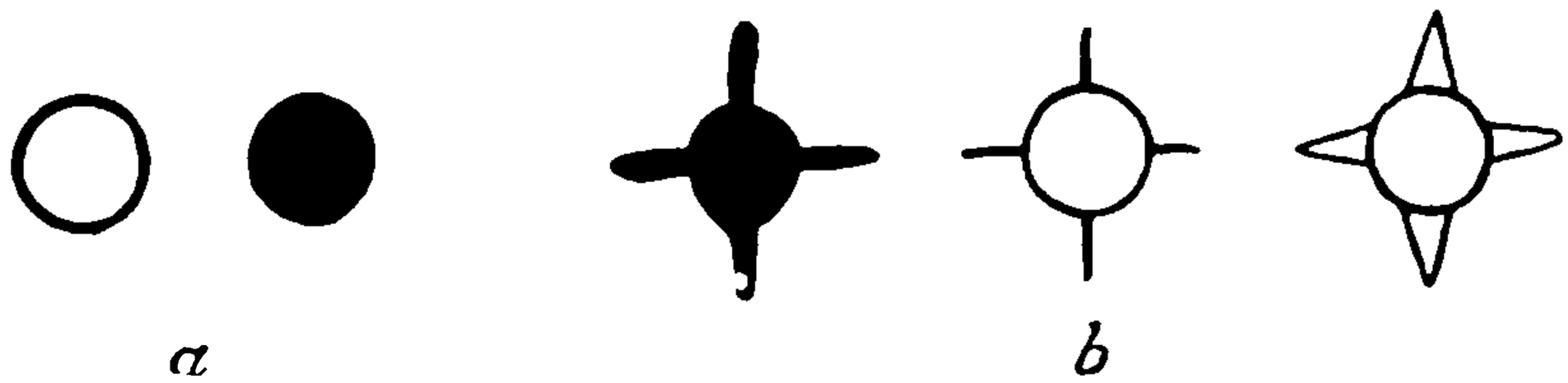


FIG. 34. *a*, Sun symbols; *b*, symbols of the sun and four winds. Omaha and Sioux.

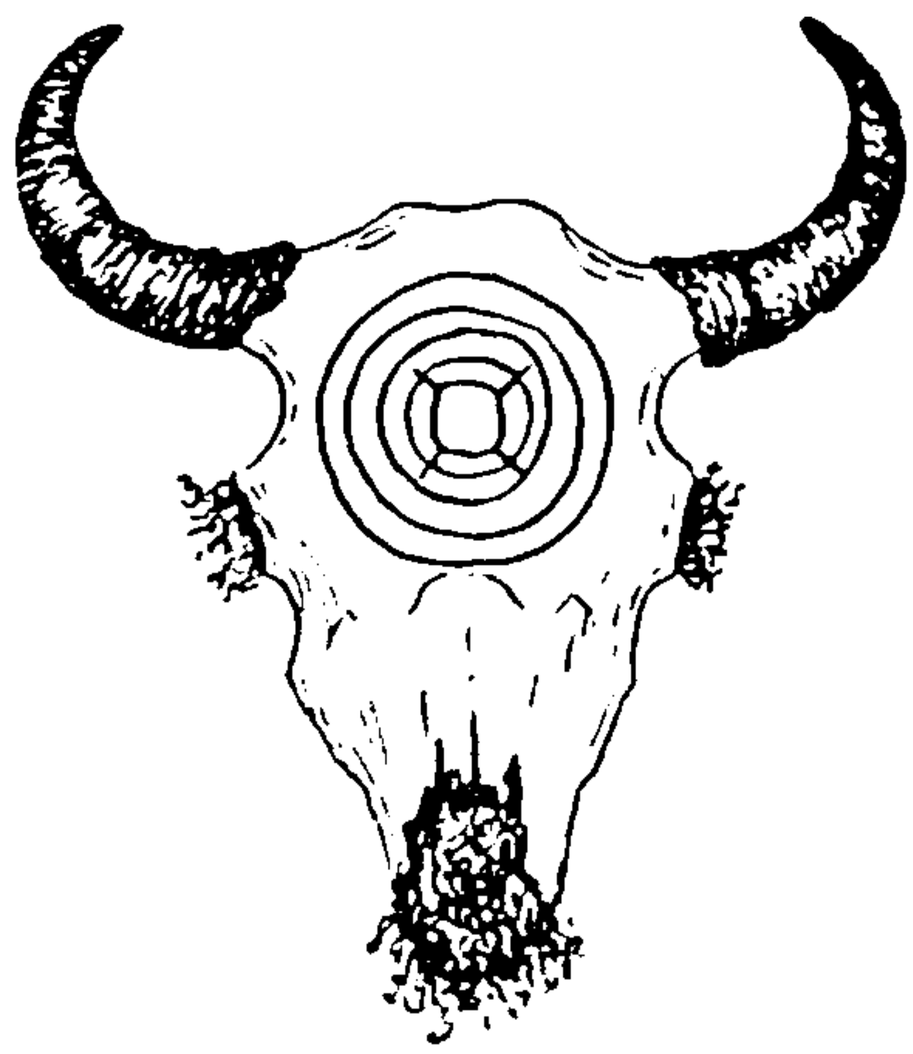


FIG. 35. Symbol of the sun, the four winds, and of the earth, air and water, painted upon a buffalo skull. Omaha.